

After Foucault - Social epistemology facing new and old knowledges

Author : **Nenad MIŠČEVIĆ**

I) Introduction: Reading Foucault on knowledge and truth

How should we think of knowledge and “knowledges” (les savoirs), old and new?¹ The new ones raise the question in an urgent fashion. Should we be looking for new facts and truths in them? After all, many people include truth into the very definition of knowledge; but other are very strongly against doing so. Should we be looking at their social functioning instead? Or should we do both? The social epistemology of new knowledge is way ahead of us. We might get some help and inspiration from great analyses of *older* knowledges.

In the French context the *maître penseur* on this topic is Foucault, so I propose throwing a glance at his original proposal and its fate in the next generation, my own, for that matter. We may treat his “subjugate knowledge” as a species of “new knowledge”. Foucault’s work has been discussed for decades; I propose here to raise some issues of principle, concerning the very foundations of our interest in knowledge. I want to point out a duality in Foucault: on the one side the passion “relentless erudition”: “patiently documentary” (Rabinov, 1984:76) and “knowledge of detail” in contrast to subversion of the very ideas of knowledge and truth. Foucault himself has tried to reconcile the two in his idea of good knowledge, subjugated by power. The duality and the reconciliation have not been sufficiently recognized and stressed in the aftermath, so I would like to do it here. This might shed some useful light upon the ways to treat knowledges, new but also old. The first tendency, or rather passion for truth, is most powerful in his monumental reconstruction of the actual history of power (*Madness and Civilization* and *Discipline and Punish*), the second in his more methodological and reflective works.

The second has been brought to paroxysm in the next generation, with deconstructionist theories of history. Stephen Best writes in the chapter of his book *“The Politics of Historical Vision”* dedicated to Foucault: “ One of the dimensions of the postmodern context is the hyperawareness of “invention.” To invent is to socially construct, often with the implication that anything constructed may equivalently be deconstructed.” (1995:87). Alun Munslow, whose reading of Foucault we shall be discussing in the last section of this paper, sees Foucault as dismissing “ disinterested historians, objectivity, progress, stability, continuity, certainty, roots, and the demarcation between history, ideology, fiction and perspective.” (1994:127). Quite a long list of items to be dismissed. Of course, deconstructionism in social epistemology continues and subverts the constructivist tradition in philosophy and social sciences. The idea that society is somehow epistemically constructed found its distant origins in the work of Hegel and Husserl; it was worked out by their followers, Dilthey, who worked in a more Hegelian tradition, and Alfred Schutz who was a disciple of Husserl. He popularized

the term “social construction”, where “construction” replaces Husserlian “constitution”. The deconstructionism is constructivism radicalized: the social world is constructed, but in a “wrong”, systematically unjust, oppressive and intolerable way. So, it should be deconstructed.

The duality of the passion for knowledge and the passion for deconstructing it leads to tensions, and the successors have had to choose. We still do. Suppose you encounter something that looks like a configuration of a new knowledge. Should you treat it with respect and admiration, seek for important hidden truths, learn from it and accumulate more knowledge? Or should you deconstruct it, and dismiss the possibility that it could be a piece of objective knowledge, appreciated by a disinterested observer or reader, that it offers some reasonable certainty about its topic, and that it is not a piece of fiction or mere ideology, all possibilities rejected by Munslow’s Foucault. The respect and admiration is fine for a scholar, but sounds culturally less attractive, the second sounds radical, revolutionary and interesting. And often gets chosen on this basis.

In this paper I would like to discuss this question focusing on Foucault as my starting point and my guide. The next section explores the two knowledge related passions, positive and negative, admiring and subversive. It culminates with a sketch of Foucault’s attempt to reconcile the two in his theory of subjugate, good knowledge. The third section turns to the deconstructionist aftermath, and tries to diagnose the problem with it. The conclusion again offers the choice of the menu, between three approaches to old-and-new knowledges. It is for the reader to choose.

II) The two games of truth

1) Epistemic attitudes and passions - knowledge-accumulating vs. knowledge-subversive

Remember the beginning of *Discipline and Punish*: three full pages of detailed documented description of torture of Damien the unsuccessful regicide, the flesh being torn from his body, and the body finally being quartered by four horses (pp. 3 to 5 Vintage Book 1977). Then come two pages of Articles by Leon Foucher, documenting the dramatic change taking place in the eighty years between the two “regimes” of power. The beginning is perhaps the most famous example of Foucault’s genius as a historian, capable of finding and recognizing crucial documents, and then interpreting them in a creative and astonishing way. This is the material through which many readers have come to appreciate his work. Of course, the effect on the reader crucially depends on him/her taking the documents to be good illustrations of what was actually happening; it is the documentary character of the testimony that does a lot of work. Erudition is not a game, it is finding out important truths about what has actually happened. Or at least, so it seems when you read *Discipline and Punish*. You learn a lot of facts. For instance, that “The old, traditional square plan was considerably refined 'in innumerable new projects . The geometry of the paths, the number and distribution of the tents, the orientation of their entrances, the disposition of files and ranks were exactly defined; the network of gazes that supervised one another was laid down. 1977:190 . And you get some drawings reproduced. Similarly with *Madness and Civilization*.

This documentary richness has been noticed many times. Here is the beginning of the *Introduction* to the English translation of the *Madness* book written by Jose Barchilon; in his view Foucault “has chosen to recreate, mostly from original documents, mental illness, folly, and unreason as they must have existed in their time, place, and proper social perspective.” (1988: V) . The crucial word is “re-create”, create all the items “as they must have existed in their time, place, and proper social perspective.” This is one thing readers admired about Foucault. His success at historical re-creation has brought him the support of George Dumezil and Jules Vuillemin, whose influence was decisive in his promotion to the chair at College de France (Eribon, 1991: 213). So, it would be a shock and a surprise if one discovered that *Madness and civilization* is a piece of fiction. That Foucault constructed a just-so story. No wonder, he himself stresses the importance of documents for his genealogical method:

1. Genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times. “Nietzsche, Genealogy History” (Rabinow, 1984:76)

He claims emphatically that genealogy (...) requires (,,) a knowledge of details, and it depends on a vast accumulation of source material (Ibid.). Call this approach “knowledge-accumulating”, following the letter and the spirit of the claim. Foucault writes, quoting Nietzsche, that he is interested in “discreet and apparently insignificant truths” (Ibid.) Genealogy is thus geared to truths; it only rejects the “metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies.” (Rabinow , 1984: 77).

Now, this is of course not the only approach present in Foucault’s work. Knowledge accumulation is accompanied by its opposite, knowledge-subversion. Some commentators see the militant, subversive drive as essential to genealogy itself:

The shift from archaeology to genealogy was accompanied by a parallel shift from aloof archivalist to impassioned militant. (Best 1995:113)

Be it as it may, the alternative slogan is “power/knowledge”: “power and knowledge directly imply one another”; power relations constitute correlative fields of knowledge, and most importantly, there is no “knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.” (*Discipline and Punish* 1977:27). The critical view is accompanied by the famous problematizing of truth, as constituted merely by power and constraint. Here is the interview with Pasquale Pasquino on “Truth and power”:

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. In societies like ours, the “political economy” of truth is characterised by five important traits . . (2006:168)

The traits are the following. First ,“truth” (Foucault puts it under quotation marks) is centered on forms of constraint. Second, “ it induces regular effects of power .” Third, “each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth.² Fourth, it is the object of immense diffusion and consumption (circulating through apparatuses of education and information); it is produced and transmitted under the control,

dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media); Fifth, it is the issue of political debate and social confrontation . (2006:169)

All this is still compatible with truth being objective. Take the truth "America has a nuclear weapon" , i.e. the proposition to this effect made true certainly in 1945. Of course, it has been strictly controlled, of course, it was the army that exercised the lion's share of the control. Of course, the making true, and the acquisition of truth have been very strictly observed and reported, most dramatically in the Nevada test. And after Hiroshima it became "the issue of political debate and social confrontation". But all this happened because it was a truth, and not a falsity. So, the five features do not necessarily contradict the objective truth of the "truth". Foucault sometimes seems to acknowledge it. He stresses that by truth he does not mean "the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted," but rather "the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true, " (2006:170). But the proposal to reinterpret truth procedurally leads in a different direction:

"Truth" is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements . "Truth" is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extends it. (2006:170)

The question "Is it really so?" is hereby silenced. The reader gets the impression that one should not look at the correspondence with reality, but at "regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements". Next, Foucault links it directly with political issues:

A "regime" of truth. This regime is not merely ideological or superstructural; it was a condition of the formation and development of capitalism. And it's this same regime which, subject to certain modifications, operates in the socialist countries...(Ibid.)

And he concludes:

The political question, to sum up, is not error, illusion, alienated consciousness, or ideology; it is truth itself. Hence the importance of Nietzsche. (Ibid.)

The same critical attitude appears in the famous pronouncements from 1970-71, in his inaugural dissertation at College de France: *L'ordre du discours* . The contrast of true and false is seen as a system of exclusion. It started with Greeks:

True discourse, that which inspired respect and terror, that to which all had to submit because it held sway over all, was the discourse spoken by men as of right and in accordance with the required ritual; it was the discourse that meted out justice... that, prophesying the future, not only foretold what would come to pass, but participated in its coming, bringing to it men's acquiescence and thus weaving itself into the fabric of fate (1981: 54).

And continued with early moderns, and the scientific “will to truth”. But Foucault is subtle:

Certainly, when viewed from the level of a proposition, on the inside of a discourse, the division between true and false is neither arbitrary nor modifiable nor institutional nor violent. But when we view things on a different scale, when we ask the question of what this will to truth has been and constantly is....than what we see as taking shape is perhaps something like a system of exclusion....(1981:54).

This is then the famous second attitude to knowledge and truth, the knowledge-subversive one. It points to a kind of pan-archism: every knowledge and every truth is a construction of power:

“ power and knowledge directly imply one another”. And in the summary of a seminar he writes:

No body of knowledge can be formed without a system of communications, records, accumulation and displacement which is in itself a form of power and which is linked, in its existence and functioning, to the other forms of power. Conversely, no power can be exercised without the extraction, appropriation, distribution or retention of knowledge. On this level, there is not knowledge on the one side and society on the other, or science and the state, but only the fundamental forms of knowledge/power... 1971: 283

We have seen that Foucault’s great historical works offer a choice. On the first level, his history-writing is meticulous, brilliantly documented, knowledge-accumulative, whereas on a second, reflective level it is often de(con)structive, knowledge-subversive, sometimes denying the passionate interest in truth that is quite obvious at the first level. In his diverse activities Foucault obviously held to both of these knowledge-related passions..The second is well-documented in his academic work and attested by his political pronouncements. As we noted, the first, the knowledge-accumulative passion has been dully recognized by historian George Dumezil and philosopher of science Jules Vuillemin. It also brought him close to Pierre Hadot, Paul Weyne and Francois Wahl. Foucault, Weyne and Wahl “ launched a new series aimed at restoring rigorous research”, writes Eribon in his biography of Foucault (1991:293) referring to the series of publications “Des Travaux” edited by the publishing house “ Le Seuil”. Our time needs rigorous research and erudition, was the main idea.

The contrast between the two passions, accumulative and subversive, and the lines of thought they suggest has been noticed early, notably by Charles Taylor in his “Foucault on Freedom and Truth,” (1984). Taylor used the tension between the two to dismiss Foucault’s views. Authors more sympathetic to Foucault have defended him since. For instance, William E. Connolly notes against Taylor that Foucault might acknowledge that although his archaeology of truth contains elements of an immanent critique – arguing that in the modern episteme the assumptions within foundational theories of subjectivity and truth constantly erode the solidity of the foundations themselves – his genealogy of the will to truth is not itself a claim to truth. It consists,

again, of rhetorical strategies designed to incite the experience of subjugation in those areas in which the question of truth recently has been given primacy. ("Foucault, and truth" in his 2008). But note how ill this fits with Foucault's serious research. If there is no claim to truth in his reconstruction of the history of madness and prison, it really reduces to rhetorical strategy "designed to incite the experience of subjugation". But would not any fine fictional movie do the job as well, and in a way accessible to millions more than are Foucault's ponderous volume. Does one really need hundreds of well-documented pages just in order to "incite the experience of subjugation" in the reader?³

Here is a simple, perhaps oversimplifying but rather typical example of the exclusively knowledge-subverting picture of Foucault, according to which "Foucault did not even try to determine what is true and what is false" writes Jeremy Campbell puts it in his "The liar's tale: a history of falsehood" :

Foucault insisted that truth is produced by power, that every society has a "regime" of truth special to it, which is an entirely idiosyncratic distortion of the classical concept of truth. He also talked about the art of not being governed as a key to the discovery of truth, detaching oneself from the jurisdiction of power, a dissenting sects did during the Reformation, by "thoughtful disobedience." (2001:296)

Note an immediate contradiction: in the first sentence truth is produced by power, presumably every truth, whereas in the second we "discover" the truth when freed from power. And of course, the idea that Foucault did not even try to determine what is true and what is false is hard to square with his brilliantly documented and erudite archeological work. The proposed resolution is fictional play:

We can make our own history, sifting through the idea inherited from the past, replacing them with new ones, "fabricated as in a fiction." Foucault did not even try to determine what is true and what is false, but only studied the fictions themselves, the various ways in which people have thought about madness, crime, sexual identity. What this method discovers, he said, is the "arbitrariness" of understanding, of what one takes to be the truth. Games of truth are always variable and uncertain. We can always think differently about what seems to be self-evident, and the starting point is a decision not to be governed.(2001:296)

We should then note the tension between the two "games of truth" present in Foucault; the knowledge accumulating and the knowledge-subversive. This is the knowledge problem he has to deal with. J.G. Merquior has pointed out a possible contradiction in Foucault, namely that he does not give up at least one truth-claim: that his own analytics of power is true." Merquior 1985:146). But this is the claim that belongs to the knowledge-accumulating line and the passion for truth.⁴ The second, subversive and destructive passion has won the public attention in the course of time, but for Foucault the first, the knowledge-accumulating one, was of crucial importance.

2) The new subjugate knowledge, Foucault's solution to knowledge problem

We can see this when we consider two contexts in which the idea of "good" knowledge and truth make their appearance. The first is the introduction of the notion of "subjugate

knowledge”, the second the discussion of truth-telling, parrhesia, in the ancient Greek context. The first is crucial for several reasons. It concerns political activism, positive (re-)evaluation of knowledge and truth and a wink to Marx. It also offers a link to the topic of the present issue of *Transeuropeennes*: are some of “new knowledges” items of subjugate knowledge?

In his *Il faut défendre la société*. (1997, engl. transl. 2005) Foucault famously talks about „returns of knowledge“ (2005: 7). The knowledge returning is a positive, affirmative and even precious thing: its is subjugated knowledge: “a knowledge that is local, regional or differential, incapable of unanimity” and “which derives its power solely from the fact that it is different from all the knowledges that surround it (2005: 8). The examples in clinical settings are knowledge of the psychiatrized, of the patient and the nurse, even of the doctor. Some of them are “naïve” or “hierarchically inferior” knowledges (Ibid.), marginalized and socially devalued.

Now the crucial piece of news about this knowledge is that it can align itself with the erudite knowledge and thus save the face of the knowledge-accumulating activity. Foucault notes that the reader might find it paradoxical to group together the local knowledge of a patient and “the historical, meticulous precise technical knowledge” of the erudite. But they do belong together, and they should become allies in political battle. For example, erudite knowledge made visible the historical content of asylums and thereby made an effective criticism possible. It seems here that truth is liberatory: once you see the actual historical context you can start criticizing effectively. And once you do this, you can ally yourself with the victims of power, the carriers of the good local and subordinate knowledge(s). The opposition of the knowledge-accumulating and knowledge-subversive line can now be avoided, and the two lines reconciled: subvert the bad knowledge/power and accumulate the good subjugated knowledge.

We can put this solution to the knowledge problem on the historical map. Foucault was very critical of the Marxist tradition. It has featured an optimistic picture of a virtuous circle of “class consciousness”, classically formulated by G. Lukacs in the twenties. You start with the correct or just class position of the working class; the position, combined with the work of intellectuals yields good universal insight into injustices and into objective social reality in general; the insight guides correct action which makes position even better, epistemically and strategically, and thus further enhances the insights. This is the virtuous circle of history and class consciousness. Althusser has added a measure of objectivism: objective scientific stance aligned with working-class stance yields true picture of social reality and of ideology which then guides correct action.

Compare this to the radical knowledge-subversive view, ascribed to Foucault by some of his commentators. Genealogical studies do not yield objectively true historical representation since genealogy is neither true nor false. The virtuous circle would then be blocked, and there would be no correct picture that could guide our actions.

The theory of good subjugate knowledge restores optimism: start with the morally admirable subordinate position of the marginalized people; the position gives them a glimpse of truth about the misdeeds of power, this glimpse combined with the erudition of intellectuals yields good insight into injustices and makes criticism possible; the insight guides correct strategy in the political battles which makes position even better, epistemically and strategically, and thus further enhances the insights. This

is the virtuous circle of truth-offering subordination, subjugate knowledge and emancipation. Foucault must have been aware of the analogy with Marxism, and, perhaps as reaction, he stresses the difference: the problem of power was posed on the Marxist side, "only in terms of the state apparatus." The detail and specificity have been lost. The Marxist paradigm is too generalist and universalistic, whereas the theory of good subjugate knowledge is geared to detail and to particular(ized) insights. But still the analogy is there. In both cases one promotes the coupling of good positions-attitudes of the socially repressed groups and of erudite intellectuals, in hope to obtain a correct picture of social reality which will be guiding correct action(battle), and the battle is making the correct picture even clearer.

Unfortunately, the optimistic proposal has its own problems. Although it offers the historian a hope of using her erudition in a politically subversive and interesting way, on the positive side it encourages the "normal" picture of historian's work: studying documents, amassing facts, doing careful analysis in the search of truth, hoping that one at least gets near it. This is quite a traditional picture of a historian's work; I personally find it appealing, but it is not a radical, revolutionary work many have hoped for.

So much about the first, and perhaps most important positive picture of truth and knowledge. The second is more historical, and it famously appears in the context of Foucault's late research about the ancient Greek notion of *parrhesia*, free speech. "Parrhesiazesthai" means "to tell the truth." Foucault asks the fundamental question: "But does the parrhesiastes say what he thinks is true, or does he say what is really true?" (1991:14). And he answers: "To my mind, the parrhesiastes says what is true because he knows that it is true; and he knows that it is true because it is really true."

There is no distance from or irony about all this in Foucault's text. The same author that has almost claimed that truth is an artifact of power here goes along with the truth-centered approach. "The parrhesiastes is not only sincere and says what is his opinion, but his opinion is also the truth. He says what he knows to be true." (Ibid.)

Moreover, the approach is also knowledge-centered, since the two coincide: "The second characteristic of parrhesia, then, is that there is always an exact coincidence between belief and truth." (1991:14).

The philosophical surprise is even bigger than this. Foucault is very comfortable with the idea that belief-knowledge and truth can thus coincide. It is Cartesianism that has torn them apart: "It would be interesting to compare Greek parrhesia with the modern (Cartesian) conception of evidence. For since Descartes, the coincidence between belief and truth is obtained in a certain (mental) evidential experience. For the Greeks, however, the coincidence between belief and truth does not take place in a (mental) experience, but in a verbal activity, namely, parrhesia." (Ibid.).

The readers of Foucault who are used to the view that truth is a construction, a mere product of power-in-discourse, and that knowledge is this power, might get shocked. In the Greek epistemological context, belief and truth brilliantly coincide in the verbal activity. No wonder it does not fit the Cartesian framework: "It appears that parrhesia, in his Greek sense, can no longer occur in our modern epistemological framework." (Ibid.). Like in contemporary, so called disjunctivist approaches to knowledge (from McDowell to Tim Williamson), the coincidence is secured by the elimination of doubt:

I should note that I never found any texts in ancient Greek culture where the

parrhesiastes seems to have any doubts about his own possession of the truth. And indeed, that is the difference between the Cartesian problem and the Parrhesiastic attitude. For before Descartes obtains indubitable clear and distinct evidence, he is not certain that what he believes is , in fact, true.

Finally, there is a fundamental ethical dimension to all this:

In the Greek conception of parrhesia, however, there does not seem to be a problem about the acquisition of the truth since such truth-having is guaranteed by the possession of certain moral qualities :when someone has certain moral qualities, then that is the proof that he has access to truth--and vice-versa. (Ibid.).

Let me note that it is curious that Foucault develops his account of Socrates as a parrhesiastic figure without noting the problem with Socrates' profession of ignorance. If parrhesia concerns telling a lot of important truths, how can a person that knows only that he does not know join the club?⁵

Let us leave this problem aside. The theory of the good subjugated knowledge, and the conviction of the possibility of coincidence of belief and truth both belong to the line that was knowledge-appreciative, truth-appreciative and therefore knowledge-accumulating. It fits well with the image of Foucault the Archeologist, the learned erudite who also with his learning supports the revolts of the marginalized. But it does not conform to the knowledge-subversive proposal in its full strength. If truth and belief can coincide in the verbal activity, and sometimes indeed do, if knowledge is helpful and even precious, than it is not knowledge, but rather false belief that has to be subverted, as the Enlightenment tradition, from Socrates on, has taught all along. So, the two parts of Foucault's socio-epistemological account pull in different directions, like the two horses in Plato's image of the soul. The erudition goal appeals to the scholarly minded, the subversion goal to social critics and (real or self-styled) revolutionaries. Foucault was able to steer the two horses, but not many scholars are so skilled charioteers. Be it as it may, it was not this knowledge-accumulating line that made Foucault into the star of cultural scene; rather the opposite.

Let me finally mention the possibility suggested by Rada Iveković in a comment: perhaps "Foucault's constant *va-et-vient* between the two" exemplifies an irreducible dynamics and plurality of positionings. Maybe the theory has to choose, but a politics of knowledge can and even must zigzag between the two. I find Rada's idea very revealing about what is actually happening in the political debate; the only issue is whether a political theorist can do the zig-zaging without appearing to be insincere, even manipulative. Imagine such a theoretician appropriating Foucault's example (used by W. Brown in her brilliant study of Foucault (2006), of pastoral power as a form of governmentality, claiming that it "migrates from church to state and in filtrates workplaces as well. It controls its subjects by promoting their well-being " but at the same time hyper-moralizes their problems. The church is offended. The knowledge-subverting epistemologist ask her: "Do you mean, it's a fact about the preachers these days; if you believe in facts you in fact (sic!) server the very power you want to criticize?" What should our theorist say? Suppose, she zigzags and answers: "Oh no, this is just the construction from my discussion club." This would be a nice victory for the church: no, we do not control people, this is just a free construction. Now, the theorist

zigzags back and says: "Oh, my remark was not made for you; you should be offended; I just remarked *sotto voce* for my fellow Foucauldian, it was not meant for you to hear". How serious can such a debate be?

III) The knowledge - subversive aftermath

We turn now to this opposite, culturally more successful line. It is captured in the phrase *Power/knowledge*, the title of a collection of his essays in English (Foucault, 1980). Power produces the subject, the state, knowledge and truth, is the simplified picture. And, this evil knowledge/power should be subverted. All is construction. For instance, Judith Butler tells us 'that juridical systems of power produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent'. Butler (1990: 2).⁶ Leonard M. Hammer makes the same point about the state: "For Foucault, the state is a creation of our discourses (...)" (Hammer, 2007:3). Steven Best says something similar about truth: Foucault does not do "theory" in modern sense, which would aim at truth (1995:87) "In place of the truth of politics Foucault analyzes a politics of truth that sees truth as a discourse that legitimates power and authority." (1995:118).

We already quoted J. Campbell's characterization of Foucault depicting him as exclusively truth-subversive author. Here is more:

Contrary to a myth whose history would repay further study, Foucault said that "truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, not the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberation themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power." For Foucault, truth, like the self, is not given but made. A vast array of humanly invented rules, ordinances, laws, social norms, institutions press in upon each person, shaping his or her identity. (2011: 296).⁷

Well, Campbell is not a specialist for Foucault. Let us then rather turn to deconstructionist authors probing more deeply Foucault's work, interested primarily in the task of the historian. We shall use as our guide Alun Munslow who has, in his *Deconstructing history* (1997), clearly opted for the radically knowledge-subverting alternative:

This vision of postmodern history not only rejects the fable of the correspondence theory, which maintains that the 'truth' is 'out there', but also dismisses the reconstructionist belief in a transparent narrative that permits the historical truth to emerge as if it existed beyond its description. Hence Foucault dismisses the crude myths that flow from this general position: brute factualism, disinterested historians, objectivity, progress, stability, continuity, certainty, roots, and the demarcation between history, ideology, fiction and perspective. He rejects, in his own words, empiricism's will to truth. (1997:124)

In chapter seven, "Michel Foucault and history", he presents the deconstructionist motivation as a noble one.

In all this his main concern is to de-mythify history's claim to represent the reality of the past, and through it, its further assertion that explanation can in some way be complete, or reasonable, or realistic. ... this becomes clear when those possessing power make an appeal to history to rationalise their hold on power. The legitimating authority of history is also used by those trying to gain power. 1997:123

The noble goal is to subvert the power by subverting its claim to true history. The bad claim has a name: "History's claim to represent the reality of the past, and through it, its further assertion that explanation can in some way be complete, or reasonable, or realistic" is characterized as "modernist history's claim".

Like Nietzsche, Foucault has come to accept that all modernist history's claims are ultimately spurious. (Ibid.)

However, a lot is to be given up for this noble goal of subverting power/knowledge. Remember Foucault's engagement for "serious research". Is it compatible with giving up the idea that the historian's explanation can be reasonable, as the above quote suggests? Can you do serious research without trying to represent the reality of the past? The "deconstructionists", and Munslow in particular, see Foucault "arguing that history is never objective because it cannot be independent of the historian and his/her own time or cultural context, and it is the power of language to create meaning rather than to discover the true direction that history has taken that is important. As a result, to be honest to him/herself and his/her reader, the historian must avoid any claims to an empiricist-guaranteed disinterested objectivity located beyond the cultural frontier in which he/she lives. (Ibid.)

For Foucault, "objectivity is a myth", Munslow claims. It follows that, in writing history, *the historian should not bother about objectivity*; why bother about a mythical requirement? In one sense, the advice enjoins modesty: don't think you can be objective, since you depend on your cultural context and many other things that are not under your control! Because history is fabricated and we are implicated in it, we are wrong to conclude that somehow we can stand outside it, Munslow argues. But taken literally, the advice just says that objectivity is a myth, not a norm for the historian, as it was thought to be. The problems with the advice are immediate. Take the work of European historians struggling against nationalistic and/or Eurocentric representation(s) of history. What they were teaching their students was that objectivity is a high value: although you are French, Croatian or Bulgarian, write about events that interest you in an impartial way. Don't cheer for your own folks! Try to see the battle from the viewpoint of the other side! Giving up on objectivity would have been fatal to this valuable enterprise. Imagine an anti-nationalist historian arguing with her nationalistic colleague. If objectivity has no value, how would she win? By appealing to sentiments? Well, the sentiments of her colleague go contrary to hers. End of the debate, and a defeat for the good side.

Why should I stop worrying about objectivity, our anti-nationalist historian might ask? Of course, I can never become fully objective, but at least I can strive, what is wrong with this? Munslow and the deconstructionists have a reply: "The reasoning

behind this position is Foucault's sustained attack on the reconstructionist belief in the adequate representation of reality through the narrative form. " (1997: 123). In other words, Foucault subscribes to the claim that there is no way adequately to represent reality in historical narration. Munslow realizes that there is a tension between this claim and the demands of erudition, of patient studying of the documents: "In spite of his assault on the epistemology of traditional history, like all historians (including deconstructionist historians) Foucault accepts the need to study the evidence in the archive. And now comes the main requirement:

The essential proviso is that history's facts are understood primarily as the epistemic discursive creations both of people in the past and of the historian, written as the relationship the historian believes exists between words and things in any episteme he/she studies. 126.

So, a history's fact is an epistemic creation of people in the past and the historian. The battle of Kosovo existed because the ancient Serbs and Turks epistemically grasped it (believed that it exists) and the historians added their constructions upon this first layer. But does this not open a space for arbitrariness? If there are no facts of history outside the epistemic creations of ancient and new observers/interpreters how do we judge the accuracy of the historian?

Munslow comes up with a solution: it is all protocols. The solution is derived from social historian Patrick Joyce and the cultural critic Antony Easthope; he actually quotes the former interpreting the later:

For a fact to be accurate or no there does not have to be a relation of correspondence . . . between discourse and the real. If the epistemological debate is not resolvable, then there is no problem about discriminating accurate from inaccurate data, and tenable from untenable arguments. We do this all the time, widely different protocols obtaining in different areas. None the less, these protocols are themselves the product of history, logic turning out on inspection to depend on 'consensus and social construction (rhetoric)'. (1997: 127-128)

He sees the rationale for the answer in the following way: because we historians are in history just as much as anyone else, it is impossible for us to disentangle representation from content. So, we should just follow the existing protocols of sorting the data into those that will be called "accurate" and those "inaccurate".

Here are three problems for this Munslow-Joyce-Easthope solution. The first is the following: one of the main intellectual attractions, also rich in emotional overtones, of Foucault's erudite work, is his choice of documents presented; he famously chooses dramatic description of items like torture or mechanisms of disciplining and controlling. In this case, an important message of the torture report is that it is a witness to the actual historical fact, intended as quite a realistic description of it. Imagine there is "no correspondence between" this piece of discourse "and the real". It is just protocols. Imagine also that other documents are equally not corresponding to reality. How would you read them? One way would be to assume that they were a piece of sado-masochistic fantasy. Another, that they were meant as a threat never put into action. Foucault does

not even dream about these options. He is adamant about these things actually having happened. What about the protocols as solution? The deconstructionist might claim that the document is accurate without corresponding to any fact simply because it constructs "reality" in agreement with the protocols-canons of the profession, so it is accurate in this sense. If we read the account of the torture in this way we conclude that the event has been "constructed" in accordance with the canons. The question remains: "Were people actually tortured, and in the way described?" Foucault claims they were. But in the light of protocol-proposal the claim should be reinterpreted: it only says that there is such a construct - as an event of torture. Not "real", of course. This is the price for accepting the protocol account.

The deconstructionist might go more moderate. She could, for instance, agree that the physical events took place, the severing of body parts, cutting of tendons, and so on. It is only the description of the events as "torture" that is our (or the "eyewitness's construction). Well, this much of realism is enough for correspondence: the things reported actually happened in the way represented. But *this much of correspondence is necessary, essential and it does most of the work* in supporting Foucault's analysis. We can multiply the examples: the actual memoir of Pierre Riviere (not an imagined, fictional one), pamphlets arguing for incarceration of beggars, and so on, quotations from a "work consecrated to the moral treatment of madness and published in 1840", in which "a French psychiatrist, Leuret, tells of the manner in which he has treated one of his patients - treated and, as you can imagine, of course, cured." and so on, without end.

Consequently, a major goal of archaeology is to free the history of thought from the problematic of subjectivity, "to define a method of analysis freed of all anthropologism" (1972:16).

The second problem is more general, and easier to state. The noble goal of subverting the power might become unattainable once we give up the ideal of objectivity. Those in power have built their historical myths; and the best way to fight them is to show that they are myths, that they are literally false, partly because of their partiality. If the would-be critic cannot argue for the falsity of the myths, and can only contrast her partiality to the partiality of the historians-servant of the power, she cannot win. It is just her partiality against their, her myth against their.

The third problem is that the appeal to canons and protocols internal to the profession has another weak spot. First, why do enormous amounts of research if the agreement is sufficient? Second, and more importantly, Foucault enjoins us to question the canon in order to find hidden truths, screened of by the canon. If the canon is all we have, and there is nothing in reality to discover, why bother? Worse, take a limited body of historians, say those in my native country. What if they are nationalistic, superficial and self-serving? Is the only option for a dissident to point to, say, American or French positive heroes, instead of simply pointing to facts that the self-serving bad local historians get wrong, hide or caricature? I would prefer the latter course, but the deconstructionists are blocking it.

Let me briefly mention another line of thought that can be connected with deconstructionism. According to it history is fundamental in special way: history

changes the fundamental anthropological kinds, the referents of basic categories of our understanding. For instance, what is knowledge, what is morally bad etc. changes with historical change. Lyotard had claimed that “media change the nature of knowledge”; this is the nice illustration of this full-fledged historical relativism. Now, what is the view of language and discourse behind the radical knowledge-subversive line? It is what we would expect.

Not only is objectivity a myth, but more significantly we should recognize the sheer impossibility of the modernist theory of referentiality between word(s) and thing(s), statement(s) and evidence(s). (1997:123).

Literally, the referentiality of a word is its property to refer to an object. Munslow also talks about the referentiality of a narrative, characterizing it as “the accuracy and veracity with which the narrative relates what actually happened in the past.” (1997:4) If I get it right the quotation claims the following: the modernist theory (semantics, philosophy, methodology) has proclaimed that there is a referentiality relation between word(s) and thing(s). The word “Foucault” refers to the great theoretician, in person. This claim is wrong; it is impossible for words to refer. So, they don’t. Let me call this interpretation “radical view”. (A more moderate reading would be that we should understand “referentiality” in some non-modernist maybe in post-modernist) way. But Munslow never mentions any alternative understanding of referentiality, so I don’t think he has an alternative reading in mind. He thinks there is no referentiality.) But remember what Foucault said:

Certainly, when viewed from the level of a proposition, on the inside of a discourse, the division between true and false is neither arbitrary nor modifiable nor institutional nor violent.(1981: 54)

If the distinction between true and false is not arbitrary at the level of a proposition, then referentiality is there. So, I must admit the radical view is at odds with Foucault’s project. To give another example, Foucault insists on historical events, according to him genealogy “must record the singularity of events” (1984:76). How are we to follow his advice if we cannot refer to them? Further, if there is no referentiality between documents and the things (persons, objects, events) they speak about, why do we read them? A historian might warn us that many items in the documents fail to refer (they are full of appeals to imaginary persons, demons, unreal powers), but of course many do, and no modernist author claimed that all words refer; indeed the discerning of fictions from reality has been a leading project of modernity. This is not what the radical view has in mind: it claims that the modernist theory of referentiality is impossible. However, this would make Foucault historical work unintelligible.

To illustrate, let us return to famous examples from the two archeological *chefs-d’oeuvre*. First, the torture of Damien we mentioned many times. If the name “Damien” does not refer, if there was no such person, then Foucault’s “report” is a scam. Again, here is a short passage from *Madness and Civilization*. Foucault starts with reference to Pinel: “With Pinel, the use of the shower became frankly juridical; the shower was the habitual punishment of the ordinary police tribunal that sat

permanently at the asylum" (1965:266) He then quotes Pinel claiming that considered as a means of repression, it often suffices to subject to the general law of manual labor a madman who is susceptible to it" He then concludes:

Everything was organized so that the madman would recognize himself in a world of judgment that enveloped him on all sides; he must know that he is watched, judged, and condemned; from transgression to punishment, the connection must be evident, as a guilt recognized by all: (1965:266)

No doubts, no skeptical withdrawal or questioning. Foucault claims that things were organized, in a thorough fashion in a certain way. He does not doubt that the name "Pinel" refers to Pinel, that Pinel's words refer to the inmates, nor does he doubt that his own words refer, and state the truth about the disciplinary-punitive organization of the asylum. Imagine now taking the radical view: in Foucault's sentence "the use of the shower became frankly juridical" the word "shower" does not refer to showers, but to the historian construction which is not a real shower. How were then the inmates disciplined by the cruel use of showers? Don't ask, since the word "inmate" does not refer either, and there are only historian's constructions, so there is no problem: the inmate-construction is taking shower-construction, and this is all. Interpreted in such a way, Foucault's brilliant analysis degenerates into an impotent caricature. And so would hundreds of pages of historical work in which he carefully documents his revolutionary claims, amasses new facts he discovered and dissects documents to reconstruct the reality behind them.⁸

Let us now return to the passage from Munslow we quoted in the Introduction. According to him, Foucault dismisses and enjoins us to reject disinterested historians, objectivity, progress, stability, continuity, certainty, roots, and the demarcation between history, ideology, fiction and perspective (1994:127). Sounds a bit like rampant negativism. But let us just mention the simple questions it raises. For one, dismissing some of the items on the list as false suggests accepting their opposites as true. For instance, dismissing continuity suggests that the discontinuity is a fact, as Foucault has argued many times. Next, as we already mentioned, rejecting objectivity and "disinterested historians" suggests that according to Foucault a historian should write history having some particular interest (political and the like) in mind. Rejecting progress suggests that we should not admit that abolition of slavery was a progress in relation to slave-owning society, that the victories in struggles for women political voice, gender and race equality and the rights of homosexuals do not bring any progress. Why struggle then? (If Munslow meant we should dismiss only false claims to progress, he should have said this; but he rejects the idea that historians claims could be false or true.) Dismissing the demarcation between history and fiction suggests accepting all sorts of fictions as good history, and dismissing histories we don't like as fictions. Would Foucault really have suggested this? What about his ideal of "rigorous research" blocking the presumption that anything goes? Doesn't it then collapse into fiction? As Merquior has put it starkly:

So at bottom Foucault's enterprise seems stuck on the horns of a huge epistemological dilemma: if it tells the truth, then all knowledge is suspect in its

pretence of objectivity; but in that case, how can the theory itself vouch for its truth? It 's like the famous paradox of the Cretan liar - and Foucault seemed quite unable to get out of it (which explains why he didn't even try to face it). (Merquior 1985: 147)

In short, we face the threat of vicious circularity and of *peritrope*, the turning of the negativist rage against the Foucauldian project itself, with the threat of a final collapse of the project. How did it all happen? Foucault is judiciously balancing the two: his radical critical remarks about discourses on the second level with affirmation of the seriousness and factual support (documentation etc.) for the genealogical study itself on the first. The second generation is marked by the ascension of anti-realism: dismiss disinterested historians, objectivity, progress, stability, continuity, certainty, roots, and the demarcation between history, ideology and fiction.

The anti-realists deconstructivists are drawing the radical consequences from destructive, radical anti-realist aspect of genealogy, moving from anti-realism to relativism about Foucault's and their own proposals.

Why did not serious genealogy win? For one, in a more argumentative setting the circularity and *peritrope* would have been diagnosed on time, and students would not be taught that there is no demarcation between history, ideology and fiction, according to Foucault (and in reality). Perhaps the radical political agenda has dictated the rhetorical flourish that has stymied the force of argument. Dan Sperber has (in conversation) mentioned as another possible factor competition in extravagancy between academics: once readers are enticed by extravagant claims, there is a push for further extravagancy.

Further, there is perhaps a deep connection between a view of political history as radically alienated, and the radical knowledge-subverting passion. If one thinks that there is no progress, that things stand terribly bad, one is prone to see some future utopian salvation as getting more and more distant. And vice versa, the more you postpone (*tu diffères*) the salvation, the more radical critic you are. So radical political utopianism goes hand in hand with radical subversion. And knowledge is the right target in the academic circles, obsessed with it.

IV) Conclusion:

Social epistemology of old and new knowledges

How should we then think of knowledge and 'knowledges' (les savoirs)? What should social epistemology of old and new knowledges look like? With what expectations and questions should we face new "knowledges" and their pretensions to be pieces of knowledge? Foucault offers us three, perhaps even four models, the pure knowledge-accumulating, the pure knowledge-subversive, and the optimistic, good knowledge preserving model, plus perhaps the *va-et-vient*, zigzagging model. His desire to hold both accumulation and subversion together can be felt in the duality of "return" and "parody". On the one hand, the classical attitudes to knowledge, upgraded by young Nietzsche, return in his own work, on the other hand they are parodied in a subversive way.

In a sense, genealogy returns to the three modalities of history that Nietzsche recognized in 1874. It returns to them in spite of the objections that Nietzsche raised in the name of the affirmative and creative powers of life. But they are metamorphosed: the veneration of monuments becomes parody; the respect for ancient continuities becomes systematic dissociation; the critique of the injustices of the past by a truth held by men in the present becomes the destruction of the man who maintains knowledge by the injustice proper to the will to knowledge. (Rabinow, 1984: 97)

In Foucault's own writing, the dual framework of genealogy, accumulative and subversive, works well. On the first level, the one of actually doing history, it is the historians-genealogists knowledge accumulation that reigns. Erudition, archive work and the keeping of the level of research are the slogans of the day, and here the accumulative model is central. He meticulously documents his claims with historical documentary material, trusting its credibility and (implicitly) even literary truth. There is in Foucault, as we have seen, a stark contrast between this confidence, search for truth and documents securing it on the one side and anti-realism about discourses studied on the other. His general pronouncements go in the direction of strong distrust: "every" discourse is infected with power, in fact more than infected, it is partly constituted by power. Truth should be put in scare-quotes: the so-called "truth" is the only thing we have, and this has later been developed as a purely knowledge-subversive deconstructive model. But then, Foucault sketches for us the third model, in which he calls the "good" intellectuals "erudites", and openly admires their erudition, combining it with the "good" among between. We have amply discussed the most popular one, the pure knowledge-subversive model, and it seems problematic, for old as for new knowledges. When a new candidate knowledge structure becomes available, it is dogmatic to reject its claim to truth outright, to equate it immediately with fiction, assume it is not demarcable from ideology, all the things that strong deconstructivists like Munslow enjoin us to do.

The opposite model, the knowledge-accumulative one, seems more fair and charitable to new knowledges. First, one should understand them, and for this, a presumption that they have something serious to tell us is probably required. Further, one should explore their ramifications, rather than jumping to deconstruct them and relegate them to the domain of fiction. The work might be boring, but is certainly more congenial to the material itself than the pure subversive one.

The zigzagging model can be used, but at each turn one should deny that one is zigzagging. Many contemporary authors do just this (I will not cite names, since proving it would take another paper), but I cannot bring myself to recommend it.

Finally, many people would prefer the last model, the one of the marriage of good subjugate knowledge and noble erudition. Many formations of subjugate knowledge are indeed new knowledges, and many knowledges to be born will start as subjugate. So, why not connect the study of them with political struggle for just causes? Unfortunately, the picture might be too optimistic. First, not all local, marginalized "knowledges" are good. A lot of them are infected with really bad stereotypes (think of the Mediterranean traditions of thinking about women, or about homosexuals). Some, that are not infected, are just morally neutral, not necessarily good. And vice versa,

some of the new knowledges might turn out to be neither subjugate nor god (and *a fortiori* not both). The knowledge-accumulating model might at the end be the most reasonable option.

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Notes

¹Thanks go to Rada Iveković, David Weberman, Dan Sperber and Ana Smokrović.

²Foucault further explains: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true .the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it; it is subject to constant economic and political incitement (the demand for truth, as much for economic production as for political power). (Ibid.)

³See also the discussion in Bove P., (1988) .

⁴He writes: We noticed one aspect of this by recalling his leaning on historical documents; but he extended the same claim to the present. To be sure, as he warned (in *Power/Knowledge*), what is at stake in his world is not at all a matter of emancipating truth from power, but merely 'of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time'. Yet just fed the ambivalence of these words: truth is always power-ridden; however, the elegant pun insinuates the possibility of a suspension of truth's enslavement to power. 'Detachment', however brief, unties truth from the sway of social struggle, conferring on it a genuine if precarious objectivity. This impression is strengthened by the passing Gramscian note ('hegemony'), for the gist of Gramsci's theory of hegemony is the appropriation of culture by a ruling class for the sake of social control, not the identification of culture as such with sheer class power. Ultimately, then, Foucault dared not to include his own theory into what he says of the intellectuals' thought: that all is fight, nothing light, in their endeavours. *The Archaeology* confessed that his analytics of power does not depend on the blunt pragmatism of the struggle, thm at least one 'pure' truth-claim subsists. But in this case, as Cotesta was quick to notice, there arises a contradiction between the truth criteria stated by the theory (truth is might, not light) and the apparent claim of the theory to be itself acpted as true, regardless of such criteria. (1985: 10).

⁵Also, one can easily imagine non-Cartesian, but rather Greek, Socratic doubts about parrhesia. Imagine a dialogue in which Socrates, himself "a parrhesiastic figure" as Foucault notes, encounters a character, call him Parrhesos, who is famous for always telling truth. "What is truth?" Socrates asks, anticipating a famous Roman politician, and Parrhesos comes up with a list: "It is true, for instance, that you are Socrates and that we are now in Athens". "But what do all these truths have in common, and how do you know about it?", Socrates asks. And the Parrhesos is quickly turned speechless, as have been so many other interlocutors.

⁶See the discussion in Douglas V. Porpora "Objectivity and phallogocentrism" in *Defending Objectivity*, 2004.

⁷He places this characterization in a curious context: Foucault, obsessed for much of his life with death, suicide, drugs, and various forms of eroticism, held that language, in the broadest sense of the word, determines what reality is. Language is the world. And truth is wholly a matter of language. It is a creature of that world, generated by its many kinds of limits and coercions, by its "power." (2001: 297)

⁸Elisabeth Roudinesco in her chapter on Foucault in her *"Philosophy in turbulent times"* has reconstructed for us the stages of the debate about Pinel and his role in the "taming of madness". First, she says, Pinel

was a pure myth, and everyone knew that the myth had been “invented by Etienne Esquirol during the Restoration solely in order to remake the founding hero into an anti-Jacobin humanitarian.” But, she notes, “like all myths, it had become truer than reality.” (2005:70). In the sixties the historians started with better strategies. But then came Foucault, undertaking “ to show that this arsenal has been constructed upon the retroactive illusion that madness was already a given in nature.” (2005:71) And he made it. Again, he made it by arguing against the “retroactive illusion”. Did he simply replace it with another illusion? Or is it rather truth that he managed to reconstruct?