Michel Foucault: 1926-1984

(*The Order of Things,* 1966; *Archeology of Knowledge*, 1969: *archive*: the collection of all material traces left behind by a particular historical period and culture; *Madness and Civilisation,* 1961; *The Birth of the Clinic,* 1963*; Discipline and Punish,* 1975; *The History of Sexuality* 1976-84) – see at GENDER as well!!

“discourse”, “discoursive formation”: a system of representations, or a group of interrelated statements which *produce* a topic, an object and a truth about it (cf: they are performative of the knowledge they produce), and construct the framework in which truth claims about the given topic can be made, in which the topic can be meaningfully talked about (“nothing has any meaning outside the discourse”). -> discourse produces “knowledge”, and “objects of knowledge” -> we accept the reality with which we are presented, we interiorise it, we can be ruled and controlled by it -> discourses are always regulative: they determine what is normal and what is abnormal. (Individuals monitor themselves in an effort to conform to the “norms”) -> power

E.g. 19th c. discourse of psychiatry: produces “mental illness” as an object of knowledge, produces “doctors” as subjects who know and “patients” who are “examined”, produces concepts such as “normal” and “pathological”, and generates strategies for “treatment” – all that in order to legitimate its own power, its own existence as a “discipline” + control (through the power gained) the individuals. Techniques of control: observation, examination (entry into the “field of documentation”) -> production of normalising knowledge (turns the individual into a “case”) -> power

-> biopolitics: Western society moves from a regimen where the ruler controls the right over life and death to one where life itself becomes a subject to control. Biopolitics governs in burocratic, scientific, rule-based ways, ostensibly (!) to improve the health and well-being of citizens.

Influence on: Giorgio Agamben (1942--) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life,* 1988., *Remnants of Auswitz: The Witness and the Archive,* 1999.

Comment on Foucault’s “biopolitics”: whereas the ancient Greek polity removed ‘bare’ (biological) life as irrelevant, Western modernity makes it a subject of control.

“bare life”: empty humanity, not quite human nor animal, an intermediate state that must be controlled by political society. This humanity stripped of nearly all of its human characteristics - present at its most denuded in the Nazi concentration camps.

“homo sacer”: the one who can be killed, who is outside the Law, the one outside society, who is deprived of humanity

Political life is based on the possibility of punishment, on the possibility of being killed. Sovereignty is the possibility of doing what is generally excluded, that is, killing. -> Both the ones who are killed and those who do the killing are somehow outside the Law (that prohibits killing). However, they represent, in fact, the concentration of the Law: the possibility of killing is and “exception”, and yet this state of exception (the suspension of the Law) is what defines Sovereignty -> the Nazi concentration camps points to the essence of human society.

“The correct question to pose concerning the horrors of the concentration camps is, therefore, not the hypocritical one of how crimes of such atrocity could be committed against human beings. It would be more honest and, above all, more useful to investigate carefully, the juridical procedures and deployments of power by which human beings could be so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that no act committed against them could appear any longer as crime.” (*HS*)

After Auswitz, something remains (the remnant) and “survival designates the purse and simple continuation of bare life with respect to a truer and more human life” (*RA*)-> Law must be replaced by Justice

<- Western society (including Western philosophy) always focused on the Person/the Human/ the Human Personality (language, morality, the mind, the soul, the things that define our “humanity”) and opposed it to the Body (which was linked to the “animal”).

What happens if “bare life” is not taken into consideration?

“I see a passerby on the street. He has long arms, blue eyes, and a mind whose thoughts I do not know, but perhaps they are commonplace... If it were the human personality in him that was sacred for me, I could easily put out his eyes. As a blind man he would be exactly as much a human personality as he was before. I should not have touched the person in him at all. I should have destroyed nothing but his eyes.” (Simon Weil, qted by Roberto Esposito, “The Person and Human Life”, 214.)

->contemporary philosophy has to focus on bare life, the homo sacer, human life as valuable in itself.

NEW HISTORICISM – CULTURAL MATERIALISM

Emerges as a response against literary formalism (New Criticism and Deconstruction), considered as elitist and conservative. Critiques the New Critical belief in the autonomy of the work of art, questions the established hierarchy between art work (the “foreground” that transends history) and history (“the background”). -> both are equally important: no distinction bw. “background” and “foreground”

-> follows the deconstructive claim concerning the need to subvert hierarchical binary oppositions, in which one (the art work) is privileged over the other (history). <- the work of art is thoroughly embedded in history, which, rather than being a “background”, is constitutive of the art work. Yet, we cannot speak of “influence” (i.e. history does not preced or “cause” the art work to emerge), rather: the artwork is intertwined in the web of *discourses* that constitute a given historical era. (In this sense, they also oppose “old” historicism, which belived in the autonomous existence of “historical facts” as influencing the artwork).

**Influenced by**:

Hayden White (historian): *Metahsitory* (1973)

There is no objective or scientific way to present history. The sequence of events historians record are selected from the historical data (texts), and plot structures are imposed upon them to transform them into a comprehensible narrative, which is told as a particular kind of story. (cf: the different versions of History presented by subsequent history books – before and after the fall of the Iron Curtain - in Hungary.)

->there is no such thing as “real history”: 1. history depends on the selection of records by historians 2. “real history” is itself a mess of records, notes, letters, journals, testaments, chronicles, poems, memoires, essays, medical treaties, religious pamphlets, philosophical works, records of scientific experiments, political speeches, advertisements, cook books all in all: all kinds of writings from the past-> history is *not* accessibleto us directly, only through the mediation of *writing*: writing has to be selected and interpreted, and then turned into “history”. -> the focus of new historicists is “history” as it appears in the various discourses of a given era.

Michel Foucault’s arguments on “discourse”, “discoursive formations” (see : above)

Karl Marx (1818-1883)

History is kept in motion by the class struggle: a conflict between the means of production (the tools, the money, the technology) and the relations of production (the position of those who work in relation to the forces of production). Problem: capitalism - people (labourers) are alienated from their own work -> they lose their autonomy. Progress: class struggle ->communism.

model of base and superstructure:

The economic base (the totality of the relations of production) sustains and determines the superstructure (the various forms of social consciousness— religion, law, politics, art, philosophy, etc.) As the base changes, so does the superstructure. “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (Marx).

->ideology: “false consciousness” determined by the economic base (such as “commodity fetishism” – the belief in the inherent value of commodities)

Žižek’s critique: it’s not that they don’t know it (that they are in ideology), but they know it and do it anyway

Rancière’s critique: neither the superstructure, nor the base is pure, there is no such thing as the “working class” in its purity.

->Antonio Gramsci

“hegemony” (from notebooks 1930-32):

“The “spontaneous” *consent* given by the great masses of population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is “historically” caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.”

->power can only operate with the *consent* (!) of the dominated, who consent to their own oppression because the dominant group (who is in possession of the economic base, i.e. the world of production) also determines their consciousness. -> ideology as a false consciousness is the one that determines all consciousnesses.

-> Louis Althusser: “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1968)

There is no “outside” ideology: ideology gains its power from being *obvious* and“natural” for everyone. (Ideology critique: shows that everything we take for natural and obvious is in fact cultural and historical.)

Ideological state apparatuses: education, religion, family. They always already call us/interpellate us as “subjects” (students, believers, girls or boys) -> we work by ourselves to be recognised as “subjects” (to be obedient to God, to the schoolmaster, to our parents, all in all: to be good subjects.) – we are accomplices in our own subjection, bc. we accept that this is the way things “obviously” are, and should be.

Paradox: subject means two things:

1. a free subjectivity, a centre of initiatives, author and responsible for its actions ->agency
2. a subjected being who subjects to a higher authority -> lack of agency

->the ISA interpellates the individual as free subject so that he or she can freely accept its subjection.

(question of cultural materialists: how to oppose ideology if it is everywhere? how to reclaim agency? – Judith Butler asked the same question, but with an emphasis on gender. Cultural Matreialists focus on all kinds of oppressed or repressed entities)

Walter Benjamin: “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940)

[historicism: bad, cultural materialism: good]

“one asks with whom the adherents of historicism [i.e. old historicists] actually empathize. The answer is inevitable: with the victor. And all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers. Historical materialists [i.e. new historicists] know what that means. Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.”

->history is always the history of the rulers. -> “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”: “the progress” of civilisation is in fact a narrative benefitting the victor; it is a history of oppression (i.e. barbarism), and yet, it is presented as progress -> *the task of the cultural materialist is “to brush history against the grain.”*: to show the anonymous toil of the oppressed masses, including failed revolutions, sufferings, revolts.

“without exception the cultural treasures he [the cultural materialist] surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror” cf: Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as a critique of “civilisation” and its inherent link with barbarism (the horror).

NEW HISTORICISM

1. History is a kind of discourse, and the past is also a network of different discourses. The literary work does not transcend these discourses but is part of them -> the text cannot be separated from it con*text*.

2. containment vs. subversion:

A literary work can be “contained” by the ruling discourses: when it perpetuates the ideological assumptions of a given era

Or it can be “subversive”: when it goes against the grain of ideas accepted as obvious in a given era. (Sinfield will introduce the term “dissidence” to offer an alternative to “subversive”)

3. Yet, they are suspicious of any “unifying worldview”: they are convinced that in each era there were many contrasting and competing “worldviews.”

4. They generally focus on marginal records, such as an anecdote, or a cook book, or a medical treatise, and then push them into the centre to show the relationship between artwork and surrounding discourses (subversion of the margin-centre dichotomy)

5. Influenced by Marxism: radical/subversive = good; conservative = bad; critical = good, blind to the ideologies in which it is embedded = bad

->aesthetics is always already politics. The work of art, or the aesthetic, does not transcend history but, even if it has ideological interests to create the illusion of transcendence, the most it can do is to erase the traces that witness its actual embeddedness *in* history.

E.g. 1. Wordsworth’s apparently “innocent”/”symbolic” Westminster Bridge can be interpreted as being engaged, “in fact’, with the French Revolution (as a historical referent).

E.g. 2. Romanticism: Romantic poets write on “nature”, “imagination”, etc. What does that have to do with politics? Jerome McGann, in *Romantic Ideology* 1984, calls their attitude *escapism* (escape from history and politics) *->* “Romantic Ideology”: the escapist belief that existing social antagonisms can be resolved in a unifying synthesis in the realm of the imagination -> Romantics (esp. the first generation) perpetuate the status quo of social inequalities. (-> New Criticism and Deconstruction perpetuates the same kind of Romantic Ideology - according to McGann.)

E.g. 3. NH reading of Blake’s “London”

I wander thro' each charter'd street,  
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,  
And mark in every face I meet  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In 1793, the term “Charter” was in the centre of political debate:

Dictionary meaning:

1. A document issued by a sovereign, legislature, or other authority, creating a public or private corporation, such as a city, college, or bank, and defining its privileges and purposes.

2. A written grant from the sovereign power of a country conferring certain rights and privileges on a person, a corporation, or the people: MAGNA CHARTA – the right of the subjects to control the absoulute power of the king, who becomes subject to the law, 1215.

3. A document outlining the principles, functions, and organization of a corporate body.

->18th c: a royal charter was granted by the king to trading monopolies -> charter seems to give rights and privileges -> it is a good thing.

Yet:

“It is a perversion of terms to say, that charter gives rights. It operates by a contrary effect, that of taking rights away. Rights are inherently in all inhabitants; but charters, by annulling those rights in the majority, leave the right by exclusion in the hands of a few… all charters have no other than an indirect negative operation. They do not give rights to A, ut they make a difference in favour of A by taking away the right of B, and consequently are instruments of injustice” (Tom Paine, *Rights of Man*) -> the charter is a bad thing

New Historicists argue that all contemporaries of Blake would have noticed this political debate lurking behind the term.

Thomas Pfau’s critique of New Historicism through the ironic enumeration of their axioms (in: The Philosophy of Shipwreck: Gnosticism, Skepticism, and Coleridge’s Catastrophic Modernity, *MLN* 122 (2007): 949–1004)

1) *The Axiom of the Archive*: that specialized research, understood as the recovery of previously overlooked materials and sources, amounts to a mode of knowledge production whose significance is taken to be self-certifying.

2) *The Axiom of Contextualism*: that the supposedly new materials so recovered largely imply their own causal and argumentative force simply by being (materially, biographically, or idiomatically) associated with a context whose outline is either being presupposed

outright or inferred from the interpretive community (re)currently husbanding it.

3) *The Axiom of Pluralism* (or ‘indifferentism’): that the power and significance of contemporary critique arises from the primitive accumulation of so many disaggregated voices and archival projects, with the further assumption that critical knowledge will

spontaneously arise from the open-market interaction of (presumptively) equivalent/indifferent (*gleichgültig*) perspectives.

4) *The Axiom of Retroactive Liberation* (or ‘secularization’): that an institutional, professional, and transactional mode of critique will eventually liberate historical meanings from their alleged past entrapment in religious or ideological norms and values and, in so doing, will restore for us their temporarily missed, yet always intended authentic (secular) core.

5) *The Axiom of Critique as a Guarantor of Historical Progress*: that the transactionalism of modern, institutional knowledge effects a teleological progression towards a hypostatized Liberal community envisioned as wholly transparent, inclusive, tolerant, and exhaustively informed. Crucially, though, this *telos* can only be articulated in a language of permanent deferral and (in what constitutes a diametrical reversal of Aristotelian thought) is being

defined by the *absence* of any specific norms or contents...

6) All symbolization is but a referential operation in disguise (e.g. Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is, in fact, about the slave trade, as a *historical referent*) see also: the NH analysis of Blake’s London, where “charter” is said to point to two opposing *historical referents*)