MICHEL FOUCAULT

is it really important to think? an interview

translated by thomas keenan

is it really important to think? an interview with michel foucault.

Libération: *On election night we asked you for your initial reactions. You didn't want to answer. But today you feel more at ease about talking...*

Michel Foucault: In fact, I was treating voting as a way of acting. After that, it's the government's turn to act. Now the time is right to react to what's starting to be done.

In any case, I believe that we've got to treat the people as grown up enough to decide for themselves when they vote, and to celebrate afterwards if the occasion demands. Besides, it appears to me that they managed quite well.

Libération: *Then what are your reactions today?*

M. F.: Three things strike me. For a good twenty years, a series of questions has been posed from within society itself. And for a long time these questions have not been admitted into "serious" and institutional politics.

The socialists seem to have been the only ones to grasp the reality of these problems, to echo them — this was, doubtless, not irrelevant to their victory.

Secondly, in relation to these problems (I'm thinking chief-
ly of the legal system [**la justice**] or the immigrant ques-
tion) the initial steps or the initial declarations conform
absolutely to what we could call a "logic of the left" [**une
"logique du gauche"**]. This is the reason Mitterrand was
elected.

Thirdly, and most remarkably, the steps don't head in the
direction of the majority opinion. Neither on the death
penalty nor on the immigrant question do the choices fol-
low the most current opinion.

This belies what one could have said about the inanity of
all those questions posed over the last ten or fifteen
years; what one could have said about the non-existence
of a logic of the left in governing; what one was able to say
about the demagogic ease of the initial steps which were
proposed. On nuclear energy, immigrants, the legal
system, the government has anchored its decisions in ac-
tual problems by referring to a logic which didn't head in
the direction of the majority opinion. And I'm sure that the
majority approves of this way of doing things, if not of the
measures themselves. In saying this, I'm not saying that
it's all done and now we can go relax. These initial steps
are not a charter, but they are, nevertheless, more than
symbolic gestures.

Compare this with what Giscard did the day after his elec-
tion: shaking hands with prisoners. This was a purely sym-
bolic gesture, addressed to an electorate which wasn't
his. Today you have an initial set of actual steps which
perhaps is run counter to one part of the electorate, but
which mark a style of government.

Libération: *In fact, it's an entirely different way of govern-
ing which seems to be established.*

M. F.: Yes, that's an important point, one which could only
have become apparent with Mitterrand's victory. It seems
to me that this election has been felt by many to be a kind
of victorious event [**évènement victoire**], that is to say, a
modification of the relation between governors and
governed. Not that the governed have taken the place of
the governors. After all, it was a question of a displace-
ment within the political class. One enters into a party
government with its incumbent dangers, and that must
never be forgotten.

But what is at stake as a result of this modification is to
know whether it is possible to establish, between gover-
nors and governed, a relation which will not be one of sub-

mission, but a relation in which work [le travail] will have an important role.

Libération: *Do you mean that it's going to be possible to work with the government?*

M. F.: We've got to get out of this dilemma: either you're for, or you're against. After all, you can be opposed and still stay involved [on peut être en face et debout]. To work with a government implies neither subjection nor global acceptance. One can simultaneously work and be restive. I even think that the two go together.

Libération: *After the critical Michel Foucault, are we going to see the reformist Michel Foucault? After all, there has been a recurrent reproach: criticism [critique] by intellectuals clears up nothing.*

M. F.: First, I'll answer the claim that "it did nothing." There are hundreds and thousands of people who have worked toward the emergence of a certain number of problems, which today are actually being posed. To say that this did nothing is altogether wrong. Do you think that twenty years ago the problems of the relation between mental illness and psychological normality, the problem of the prison, the problem of medical power, the problem of the relations between the sexes, etc.,...were being posed as they are posed today?

On the other hand, there are no reforms in themselves. Reforms are not produced out of thin air, independently of those who make them. One cannot not take into account those who will have to manage this transformation.

And then, above all, I don't think that one can oppose criticism and transformation, "ideal" criticism and "real" transformation.

A critique does not consist in saying that things are not good as they are. It consists in seeing what kinds of self-evidences [évidences], liberties, acquired and non-reflective modes of thought, the practices we accept rest on.

We've got to avoid the sacralization of the social as the sole instance of the real, and stop treating thought [la penseé] — this essential thing in human life and human relations — lightly. Thought exists, well beyond and well within systems and edifices of discourse. It is something which often hides itself, but it always animates everyday behavior. There is always a little bit of thought even in the silliest institutions, always some thought even in mute habits.

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Criticism consists in driving this thought out of hiding and trying to change it: showing that things are not as obvious as we might believe, doing it in such a way that what we accept as going without saying no longer goes without saying. To criticize is to render the too-easy gestures difficult.

In these conditions, criticism (and radical criticism) is absolutely indispensable for all transformation. Because a transformation which would remain within the same mode of thought, which would only be a certain manner of better adjusting the same thought to the reality of things, would only be a superficial transformation.

On the other hand, from the moment one begins to be unable, any longer, to think things as one usually thinks them, transformation becomes simultaneously very urgent, very difficult, and altogether possible.

Thus, there isn't a time for criticism and a time for transformation, there aren't those who make the criticisms and those who do the transforming, those who are locked away in an inaccessible radicalism and those who are compelled to make the necessary concessions to the real. In fact, I believe that the work of profound transformation can only be done in an atmosphere which is free and always agitated by permanent criticism.

Libération: *But do you think that the intellectual must have a programmatic role in this transformation?*

M. F.: A reform is never anything but the result of a process in which there is conflict, confrontation, struggle, resistance,....

To say to yourself at the outset, just what is the reform which I'm going to be able to accomplish?, isn't, I believe, an objective for the intellectual to pursue. His role, precisely because he works within the order of thought, is to see to what extent the liberation of thought can succeed in rendering these transformations so urgent that one longs to make them, and so difficult that they're profoundly inscribed in the real.

It's a question of making the conflicts more visible, of making them more essential than simple confrontations of interests or simple institutional obstructions. From these conflicts, from these confrontations, must issue a new relation of forces, of which the provisional profile will be a reform.

34 If there hasn't been, at the base, the work of thought on itself and if, indeed, some modes of thought, that is to

say, some modes of action, haven't been modified, then whatever the project of reform is, you know that it's going to be phagocytized, digested by modes of behavior and institutions which will always be the same.

Libération: *After having participated in numerous movements, you have withdrawn [en retrait] a little. Are you going to enter into such movements again?*

M. F.: Each time that I've tried to do theoretical work it has grown out of elements of my own experience: always in relation to processes which I saw unfolding around me. It's precisely because I thought I recognized cracks, muffled shocks, disfunctionings, in the things I was seeing, in the institutions I was dealing with, in my relations with others,...that I went to work — some autobiographical fragments.

I am not a [en retraite] retired activist who, today, would like to re-enter the service. My mode of work has not changed very much; but what I expect from it is that it will continue to change me.

Libération: *They say that you're sort of pessimistic. Listening to you, I'd believe, rather, that you're optimistic?*

M. F.: There is an optimism which consists in saying: well, in any case, it couldn't be better. My optimism consists, rather, in saying: as long as things can be changed, fragile as they are, held together more by contingencies than by necessities, more by the arbitrary than by the obvious, more by complex but transitory historical contingency than by inevitable anthropological constraints....You know, saying that we are much more recent than we believe is not a way of placing all the burden of our history on our shoulders. Rather, it puts within the range of work which we can do to and for ourselves the greatest possible part of what is presented to us as inaccessible.

translator's afterword: foucault on government.

Michel Foucault's interview with Didier Eribon, an editor of the leftist Parisian daily **Libération**, appeared in the newspaper's 30-31 May 1981 issue. Its pretext was the recent electoral victory of a socialist government led by François Mitterrand, and its organizing term is precisely that: government. As this term has played an increasingly important role in Foucault's current writings, what follows is a brief attempt to specify its particular (in)determinations.

"Dans la pensée et l'analyse politique," wrote Foucault in **La volonté de savoir** (1976), "on n'a toujours pas coupé la tête du roi."[1] It is toward such a **coupe**, rather than a **coup**, a displacement rather than a replacement, that Foucault's work over at least the last seven years has been headed. And if the violent edge of this figurative French revolution suggests as well that his "thought and analysis" would not allow itself to take place in any simply thoughtful or analytical space, then we might even expect it to insist on a certain "political dimension."[2] Of course, politics are obviously at work on the surface of this interview; of more interest, though, is the entrance of the political precisely by way of the staging of the spectacular analytical **coupe**, which itself takes place in terms of "government."

Thus the interview can be read as a moment of specification in Foucault's very careful attempt to think "power without the king [penser...le pouvoir sans le roi],"[3] a moment in a political or politicized "history of 'governmentality,'"[4] and a further instance of the **coupe**, the **sans**, the "twisting out" (in Heidegger, **Herausdrehung**) or displacement of kingly negativity. For if it is his task to think without the king, to evade the **après coup** or deferred action of Hegel,[5] and thus to think power without determinate negation (the questioning of the "repressive hypothesis"), then the question of power cannot itself be posed by a mere reverse negativity (the negation of negation) but rather by the asymmetrical inscription of indetermination into the category of power. On this reading, the problematic of government works to displace, to question asymmetrically, the problematic of the king, to operate the with-out (**sans**) and thus to disarticulate or unde(te)rmine determinate notions of power.[6]

But this deranging term, government, has an errant trajectory of its own.[7] We have taken as our point of departure **La volonté de savoir**; to this we could add a series of texts[8] from the same time (1976-77) in which Foucault implicitly tied the word "govern" to the project of the king's (head's) displacement (the eschewing or inversion of Hobbes' leviathan).[9] Here, though, even as Foucault proposed a "subversive recodification" of determinate negativity, of the "meagre" dialectical or contradictory logic of a "binary structure with 'dominators' on one side and 'dominated' on the other," power was nevertheless still thought within a "logic" of "relations of domination" as such, if not as simply prohibitive, repressive, or negative.[10] But Foucault's next lecture course at the Collège de France made it clear that the disruptive force of the term

"government" — the sharp asymmetry it introduced into the project of "couper la tête du roi" — was difficult to circumscribe. His 1977-78 course summary specified this, insisting on "the notion of 'government' " as the instrument of asymmetry, insofar as it was taken as the course's "guiding thread": "it is not a question of a substitution but rather of a displacement of emphasis."[11] Foucault's focus that year was the "formation of a political 'governmentality,' " the becoming-governmental of the state apparatus. Thus the course investigated "the procedures and means which were put into operation in order to assure this government," understood as "an activity of attempting to guide individuals throughout their lives, and placing them under an authority...." The "way of governing," then, remained assimilable to categories like "ruling, guiding, and directing," even as it shattered the more formidable principle of domination.[12] Foucault continued to insist on this in his next course, which treated the particular governmental practice, or technology, he called "liberalism" as a set of "procedures through which a state administration directs the conduct of men."[13] Government, then, could not be approached **as** the state, not "as an institution but, rather, as the activity which consists in directing human conduct within the setting and with the instruments of a state."[14]

Foucault's 1980 course was titled "On the government of the living,"[15] and it seems to mark the most serious turn in the work of dis-symmetricalization by "government." Where the **coupe**, the **sans**, first took apart the king's No, and then slowly displaced domination in favor of a sort of administration or regulation by a certain state, it now turned away from the state or even from the police toward the self. His course summary asked that "government" be "understood in the large sense of techniques and procedures designed to direct the conduct of men. Government of children, government of souls or of consciences, government of a home, of a State, or of oneself."[16] Thus the course "studied the problem of the examination of conscience and the confession" in early Christianity as a question of "self"-government, an instance where "the government of men demands on the part of each who is directed, beyond acts of obedience or submission, certain 'acts of truth,'...the manifestation, in enunciation, of who one is."[17] Thus the analysis of government can be seen to reorganize or rewrite earlier concerns into a "history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects,"[18] what Foucault has called "technologies of the self."[19] The question then has shifted from the king to "self-identity as referred to the problem of individualising power,...the government of individuals by

37 their own verity."[20]

We can conclude with one of Foucault's most recent for- mulations on "government," delivered in November 1980 and again in June 1982, not because it is closest to the truth or because it "defines" the term, determines it, but rather because it underlines the errancy or indetermina- tion inscribed "within" it and insists on the continuing operation of the **coupe** on negation:

I think that if one wants to analyze the genealogy of the subject in Western civilizatin, [one] has to take into ac- count...the points where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to proc- esses by which the individual acts upon himself. And con- versely, [one] has to take into account the points where the technologies of the self are integrated into structures of coercion or domination. The contact point, where the way individuals are driven by others is tied to the way they conduct themselves, is what we can call, I think, govern- ment. Governing people, in the broad sense of the word, is not a way to force people to do what the governor wants; it is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which assure coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself.[21]

It is in the "versatility" of this equilibrium, in the "conflicts" of the complementarity, that both the action of the displacement and the political dimension alluded to earlier insist, especially in this interview. For if the opera- tion of "government" 's **coupe** dismantles the integrity or symmetry of power on the level of political thought and analysis, then it also provides a strategic frame for every- day political considerations. Thus Foucault's interest is, here as elsewhere,[22] in displacing the for/against "dilem- ma" toward a principle of reform as work, as **travail avec un gouvernement**. It is a testimony to the rigorously in- determinate asymmetry of his **sans**, as of his **avec**, that a critical politics and political thought continue to compel him.

NOTES

 1. Michel Foucault, **La volonté de savoir**, Paris: Galllmard, 1976, p. 117. Roughly translated, the sentence says: "In political thought and

analysis, we still haven't (or, we have always not) cut off the king's head." This book has been translated into English by Robert Hurley as **The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction**, New York: Pantheon, 1978. The image of decapitation recurs in the interview titled "Truth and Power," in Michel Foucault, **Power/Knowledge**, ed. Colin Gordon, tr. Gordon **et al.**, New York: Pantheon, 1980, p. 121.

2. Foucault, in a lecture at Berkeley in October 1980, glossed his phrase "political dimension" as follows: "By this expression, 'political dimension,' I mean an analysis that relates to what we are willing to accept in our world, to refuse, and to change, both in ourselves and in our circumstances."

3. Volonté, p. 120. On the radicality of a **sans** like this one, see Jacques Derrida, "Living On: Border Lines," in Harold Bloom **et al.**, **Deconstruction and Criticism**, tr. James Hulbert, New York: Seabury, 1979, pp. 105-06 and 145-46. Derrida is reading certain texts of Blanchot (an influence he shares with Foucault) and the action in them of a **sans** which "so often comes to neutralize (without positing, without negating) a word, a concept, a term (x-less x): '-less' or 'without' without privation or negativity **or** lack ('without' without **without, less**-less 'less')...." It is the operation of such a **sans** "without negating" that we are reading in Foucault's texts.

4. The phrase occurs in a lecture Foucault delivered at the Collège de France in February 1978, unavailable in French but translated into Italian as "La 'governamentalita,' " ed. and tr. Pasquale Pasquino, **Aut Aut** 167-8, September-December 1978, pp. 12-29, and Into English as "Governmentality," tr. Rosi Braidotti, **I & C** 6, Autumn 1979, pp. 5-21, p. 20. During this lecture Foucault proposes to rename his course for that year from "Security, Territory, and Population" to "A History of Governmentality."

5. See Michel Foucault, **L'ordre du discours**, Paris: Gallimard, 1971, pp. 75-80; in English as "The Order of Discourse," tr. Ian McLeod, **Untying The Text**, ed. Robert Young, Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, pp. 48-78, pp. 74-75. On the difference between mere reversal (**Umdrehung**) and twisting-out (**Herausdrehung**), see Martin Heidegger, **Nietzsche**, two vols., Pfullingen: Neske, 1961, p. I:242.

6. On dis- or a-symmetry, see Foucault's 1975-76 course summary, in **Annuaire du Collège de France** 1976, Paris: Collège de France, 1976, pp. 361-66, p. 363; in English as "War in the Filigree of Peace," tr. Ian McLeod, **Oxford Literary Review** 4:2, 1980, pp. 15-19; p. 17. On displacement, see Foucault's summary in **Annuaire** 1978, pp. 445-49, p. 445; in English as "Foucault at the Collège de France I: A Course Summary," tr. James Bernauer, **Philosophy and Social Criticism** 8:2, Summer 1981, pp. 235-42, p. 238; see also "The Order of Discourse," p. 75.

7. Foucault's most Important consideration of the notion of "error" occurs in his introduction to Georges Canguilhem, **On the Normal and the Pathological**, tr. Carolyn R. Fawcett with Robert S. Cohen, Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1978, pp. ix-xx.

8. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 in **Power/Knowledge**.

9. On "governing," see **Power/Knowledge**, pp. 97, 112. For various formulations of a notion of displacement or asymmetricalization, **see** pp. 102, 95, 97-98.

10. Power/Knowledge, pp. 123, 142-44.

11. Annuaire 1978, p. 445; "Collège de France I," p. 238.

39 **12.** "Collège de France I," p. 239.

13. **Annuaire** 1979, pp. 367-72, p. 371; in English as "Foucault at the Collège de France II: A Course Summary," tr. James Bernauer, **Philosophy and Social Criticism** 8:3, Fall 1981, pp. 351-59, p. 358.

14. "Collège de France II," p. 354.

15. In French, "Du gouvernement des vivants" (**Annuaire** 1979, p. 747).

16. **Annuaire** 1980, pp. 449-52, p. 449.

17. **Annuaire** 1980, p. 449. Compare Derrida, "Living On: Border Lines," pp. 87, 94-98.

18. Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," partial tr. Leslie Sawyer, **Critical Inquiry** 8:4, Summer 1982, pp. 777-95, p. 777.

19. See Michel Foucault and Richard Sennett, "Sexuality and Solitude," **London Review of Books** 3:9, 21 May - 3 June 1981, pp. 3-7, esp. p. 5.

20. Michel Foucault, "Omnes et Singulatim: Towards a Criticism of 'Political Reason,' " in Sterling M. McMurrin, ed., **The Tanner Lectures on Human Values II**, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press and Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 223-54, pp. 227 and 240.

21. Michel Foucault, "Subjectivity and Truth," lecture delivered at Dartmouth College, 17 November 1980. Similar material, including the same formulation, was presented during Foucault's summer 1982 course at the University of Toronto, called "Dire vrai sur soi-même," or "The Discourse of Self-Disclosure."

22. See, for instance, **Power/Knowledge**, pp. 143-45, for an important argument about a politics of reform. We do not mean to suggest that this "politics of displacement" (to borrow a phrase from Andy Parker) or of reform and transformation (Foucault's words in the interview) is a recent concern: indeed, it can be argued that it is constitutive of his work. See, for instance, his extraordinary "Rèponse á une question," **Esprit** 371, Mai 1968, pp. 850-74; in English as "Politics and the Study of Discourse," tr. Colin Gordon, **Ideology and Consciousness** 3, 1978, pp. 7-26, esp. pp. 9, 16-19, 21.