

## Revolutionary Action: "Until Now"

A discussion with Michel Foucault  
under the auspices of *Actuel*

MICHEL FOUCAULT: What is the most intolerable form of repression for those of you currently enrolled in a lycée [high school]: family authority, the impact of the police on ordinary life, the organization and discipline imposed by the lycée, or the passive role encouraged by the press (and this may include a journal like *Actuel*)?

SERGE: Repression in the schools is the most obvious, since it is aimed at those groups trying to be active; it seems most violent and we experience its effects in the most immediate way.

ALAIN: We shouldn't ignore the street scene—the raids in the Latin Quarter, the constant harassment of drug searches by the police. They seem to be everywhere: no sooner do I sit down than someone in uniform is telling me to stand. Aside from this, the schools may be worse: the obvious repression, biased information.

SERGE: We must make distinctions: first, there is the action of parents who force their children into schools, as a necessary step toward a particular professional goal and who discourage anything that gets in the way; second, there is the administration which prohibits all forms of free or collective action; and finally, the teaching itself, but this is more complicated.

This interview appeared in *Actuel*, No. 14 (Nov. 1971), pp. 42-47. It is reproduced here by permission of *Actuel*. (Footnotes supplied by the editor.)

JEAN-PIERRE: In most cases, our classes are not immediately experienced as repressive, even if they are.

FOUCAULT: You're right, of course, since the communication of knowledge is always positive. Yet, as the events of May showed convincingly, it functions as a double repression: in terms of those it excludes from the process and in terms of the model and the standard (the bars) it imposes on those receiving this knowledge.

PHILIPPE: It's your belief, then, that our educational system is not meant to convey real knowledge, that its main objective is to separate the good from the bad, and that it does this according to the standards of social conformity?

FOUCAULT: Knowledge initially implies a certain political conformity in its presentation. In a history course, you are asked to learn certain things and to ignore others: thus, certain things form the content of knowledge and its norms.<sup>1</sup> To give two examples: official knowledge has always represented political power as arising from conflicts within a social class (the dynastic disagreements within the aristocracy or parliamentary conflicts in the middle class) or, perhaps, as a conflict generated between the aristocracy and the middle class. Popular movements, on the other hand, are said to arise from famines, taxes, or unemployment; and they never appear as the result of a struggle for power, as if the masses could dream of a full stomach but never of exercising power. The history of this struggle for power and the manner in which power is exercised and maintained remain totally obscured. Knowledge keeps its distance: this should not be known! To take another example: the workers, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, carried out detailed investigations into their material conditions. This work served Marx for the bulk of his documentation; it led, in large part, to the political and trade-union practices of the proletariat throughout the nineteenth century; it maintains and develops itself through

1. A repetition of the theme of exclusion found in *L'Ordre du discours*, pp. 10-23.

continuing struggles. Yet this knowledge has never been allowed to function within official knowledge. It is not specific processes that have been excluded from knowledge, but a certain kind of knowledge. And if we become aware of it today, it is in a secondary sense: through the study of Marx and those elements in his texts that are most easily assimilated into official knowledge.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS: For the sake of argument, Alain, would you say that most students in your school are from working class families?

ALAIN: A little under fifty percent.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS: Were trade unions discussed in your history courses?

ALAIN: Not in those I attended.

SERGE: Nor in mine. Look at the way our studies are organized: only past history is discussed in the lower grades. You're sixteen or seventeen before you arrive at modern ideas or movements—the only ones that can be slightly subversive. Yet even in the third year of a lycée, teachers of French absolutely refuse to discuss contemporary authors; and of course, there is never a word about the actual problems of life. When we do touch on them in the last two years, it's probably too late, given the conditioning of our past education.

FOUCAULT: As a way of approaching texts—as a matter of choice and exclusion—this presentation affects everything that is said and done in the present. The system is telling you in effect: "If you wish to understand and perceive events in the present, you can only do so through the past, through an understanding—carefully derived from the past—which was specifically developed to clarify the present." We have employed a wide range of categories—truth, man, culture, writing, etc.—to dispel the shock of daily occurrences, to dissolve the event. The obvious intention of those famous historical continuities is to explain; the eternal "return" to Freud, Marx, and others is obviously to lay a foundation. But both function to exclude the radical break introduced by events.<sup>2</sup> In the broadest sense, both the nature of

2. Ibid., p. 59.

events and the fact of power are invariably excluded from knowledge as presently constituted in our culture. This is to be expected since the power of a certain class (which determines this knowledge) must appear inaccessible to events; and the event, in its dangerous aspect, must be dominated and dissolved in the continuity of power maintained by this class, by a class power which is never defined. On the other hand, the proletariat develops a form of knowledge which concerns the struggle for power, the manner in which they can give rise to an event, respond to its urgency, avoid it, etc.; this is a knowledge absolutely alien to the first kind because of its preoccupation with power and events. For this reason, we should not be fooled by the modernized educational program, its openness to the real world: it continues to maintain its traditional grounding in "humanism" while emphasizing the quick and efficient mastery of a certain number of techniques, which were neglected in the past. Humanism reinforces social organization and these techniques allow society to progress, but along its own lines.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS: What criticism do you direct against humanism; and what values, in another system for transmitting knowledge, can replace it?

FOUCAULT: By humanism I mean the totality of discourse through which Western man is told: "Even though you don't exercise power, you can still be a ruler. Better yet, the more you deny yourself the exercise of power, the more you submit to those in power, then the more this increases your sovereignty." Humanism invented a whole series of subjected sovereignties: the soul (ruling the body, but subjected to God), consciousness (sovereign in a context of judgment, but subjected to the necessities of truth), the individual (a titular control of personal rights subjected to the laws of nature and society), basic freedom (sovereign within, but accepting the demands of an outside world and "aligned with destiny"). In short, humanism is everything in Western civilization that restricts *the desire for power*: it prohibits the desire for power and excludes the possibility

of power being seized. The theory of the subject (in the double sense of the word) is at the heart of humanism and this is why our culture has tenaciously rejected anything that could weaken its hold upon us. But it can be attacked in two ways: either by a "desubjectification" of the will to power (that is, through political struggle in the context of class warfare) or by the destruction of the subject as a pseudovereign (that is, through an attack on "culture": the suppression of taboos and the limitations and divisions imposed upon the sexes; the setting up of communes; the loosening of inhibitions with regard to drugs; the breaking of all the prohibitions that form and guide the development of a normal individual). I am referring to all those experiences which have been rejected by our civilization or which it accepts only within literature.<sup>3</sup>

JEAN-FRANÇOIS: Since the Renaissance?

FOUCAULT: From the beginning of Roman law—the armature of our civilization that exists as a definition of individuality as subjected sovereignty. The system of private property implies this conception: the proprietor is fully in control of his goods; he can use or abuse them, but he must nevertheless submit to the laws that support his claim to property. The Roman system structured the government and established the basis of property. It controlled the will to power by fixing the "sovereign right of property" as the exclusive possession of those in power. Through this elegant exchange, humanism was institutionalized.

JEAN-PIERRE: Society forms an organized whole. It is repressive by nature because it seeks to reproduce itself and perpetuate its existence. How is struggle possible: are we dealing with a global and indissociable organism which responds to a general law of conservation and evolution, or is it a more differentiated entity where one class tries to maintain its interest against another, where one class profits by maintaining order and another is set

3. Cf. *The Order of Things*, p. 300.

on its destruction? The answer is far from obvious: I don't subscribe to the first hypothesis, but the second seems too simplistic. There is, in fact, interdependence within the social organism which perpetuates itself.

FOUCAULT: The movement of May suggests an initial response: the individuals who were subjected to the educational system, to the most constraining forms of conservatism and repetition, fought a revolutionary battle. In this sense, the intellectual crisis created by the events of May goes very deep. Society has been placed in an extremely perplexing and embarrassing position from which it has yet to extricate itself.

JEAN-PIERRE: But teaching is far from being the only instrument of humanism, the only tool for social repression—there are more essential mechanisms that operate before we enter school or outside of school.

FOUCAULT: It has always been a problem for someone like me, someone who has been teaching for a long time, to decide if I should act outside or inside the university. Should we decide that the question was settled in May, that the university has broken down, and that we can now move on to other concerns? (This is plainly the direction of some of the groups with whom I am working in the struggle against repression, in the penal system, in psychiatric hospitals, and in the police or judicial systems.) Or is this merely a way of evading a fact that continues to embarrass me: namely, that the university structure remains intact and that we must continue to fight in this arena?

JEAN-FRANÇOIS: Personally, I don't believe that the university was actually demolished. I think that the Maoists were wrong to dismiss the university—which might have served as a solid base—to cultivate the factory where their task was especially difficult and their position relatively artificial. The university was in the process of cracking: we should have widened the fissure; we should have created an irreparable rupture in the system that transmits knowledge. The school and the university remain

decisive. Life doesn't end at the age of five, even if one does have an alcoholic father and a mother who does her ironing in the bedroom.

JEAN-PIERRE: The revolt in the universities immediately confronted a problem—always the same one: the revolutionaries, or those who had nothing practical to gain from their education, were blocked by the students who wanted to work and to learn a trade. What were we to do? Search for new methods? New content?

JEAN-FRANÇOIS: In the last analysis, this would only improve the present structure and train more students for the system.

PHILIPPE: That isn't so. We can learn different things and be exposed, in a different way, to a different knowledge without falling back into the system. If the university is abandoned after it's been shaken a bit, it will continue to function and to reproduce itself through inertia—unless we can propose concrete alternatives and gain the support of its victims.

FOUCAULT: The university stands for the institutional apparatus through which society ensures its uneventful reproduction, at the least cost to itself. The disorder within institutions of higher learning, their imminent demise (whether real or apparent), does not extend to the society's will for conservation, identity, and repetition. You are asking what can be done to disrupt the system's cycle of social reproduction; and it isn't enough to suppress or overturn the university. Other forms of repression must also be attacked.

JEAN-PIERRE: Unlike Philippe, I don't hold with this idea of a "different" education. What would interest me, on the other hand, would be the reversal of the university's functions under revolutionary pressure: undoing earlier conditioning and destroying established values and knowledge. An increasing number of teachers are prepared to attempt this.

FRÉDÉRIC: Experiences of this sort carried to their logical conclusion are very rare. Only Sénik comes to mind, a professor of philosophy at Bergson in 1969: he was actually able to demolish

the status of the teacher and of knowledge in general. Of course, he was quickly isolated and excluded. Academic institutions still possess active mechanisms to defend themselves. They are still capable of integrating a great many things and of eliminating those foreign objects they cannot assimilate.

You speak as if French universities, before May 1968, were adapted to our industrial society. In my opinion, they were not particularly profitable or functional, but especially archaic. The events of May effectively fractured the old institutional framework of higher education. But did the ruling class suffer? It reconstructed the system and it is now far more functional. It preserved the best schools, those whose primary function was the selection of technocrats. It created a center like Dauphine, the first American-style business school in France. And finally, for the last three years, official opposition has been confined to Vincennes and to certain departments at Nanterre—university pockets that are irrelevant to the system, nets in which the small fish of the left have been trapped. The university eliminates its archaic structure and it effectively adapts itself to the needs of neocapitalism; it is now that we should return to the field of struggle.

FOUCAULT: I'm afraid I was referring to the "death of the university" in the most superficial way. The events of May effectively ended the form of higher education that began in the nineteenth century—the curious set of institutions that transformed a small proportion of the young into a social elite. This nevertheless leaves the full range of hidden mechanisms through which a society conveys its knowledge and ensures its survival under the mask of knowledge: newspapers, television, technical schools, and the lycée (even more than the university).

SERGE: Repression in the lycée continues unchecked. The educational system is sick, but only a minority are aware of this and dare to oppose it.

ALAIN: And the politicized minority of two or three years ago has disappeared from our school.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS: Does the fact of long hair continue to mean something?

ALAIN: Not anymore. Fashionable students now let their hair grow.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS: And drugs?

SERGE: Drug use has no meaning in itself. It largely means that a student has abandoned the idea of a career. The politicized students continue their studies; those who take drugs leave school altogether.

FOUCAULT: The campaign against drugs is a pretext for the reinforcement of social repression; not only through police raids, but also through the indirect exaltation of the normal, rational, conscientious, and well-adjusted individual. This prominent image can be found at every level. Read today's headlines in "France-Soir": fifty-three percent of the French population favors the death penalty, while only thirty-eight percent were supporting it a month ago.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS: Does this stem from the revolt at Clairvaux prison?

FOUCAULT: Evidently. We emphasize the fear of criminals: we brandish the threat of the monstrous so as to reinforce the ideology of good and evil, of the things that are permitted and prohibited—precisely those notions which teachers are now somewhat embarrassed to communicate. What the professor of philosophy no longer dares to say in his convoluted language, the journalist can now say in the most direct fashion. You might think that this has always been the case, that journalists and professors always existed to say the same things. But journalists are now expected, if not forced, to say these things in a loud and persistent voice, and at precisely the moment when professors no longer can. There is an interesting story in this: because of Clairvaux, a week of revenge was inflicted on the prisons. Inmates were indiscriminately beaten by the guards, especially at Fleury-Mérogis, the prison for juveniles. The mother of an inmate came

to see us, and I went with her to R.T.L.<sup>4</sup> to find coverage for her report. A journalist agreed to see us and said: "You know, I'm not surprised by this; the guards are nearly as degenerate as the prisoners." A professor who spoke this way in a lycée would create a small riot and would have his ears boxed.

PHILIPPE: That's true; a teacher would never speak this way. Is it that he no longer can or that he would say it differently, in keeping with his role? In your opinion, how can we fight this ideology and its mechanisms of repression, apart from petitions and other actions of reform?

FOUCAULT: Local actions which are well-timed can be quite effective. Consider the actions of the G.I.P. (Information Group on Prisons) during the past year. The ultimate goal of its interventions was not to extend the visiting rights of prisoners to thirty minutes or to procure flush toilets for the cells, but to question the social and moral distinction between the innocent and the guilty. And if this goal was to be more than a philosophical statement or a humanist desire, it had to be pursued at the level of gestures, practical actions, and in relation to specific situations. Confronted by this penal system, the humanist would say: "The guilty are guilty and the innocent are innocent. Nevertheless, the convict is a man like any other and society must respect what is human in him: consequently, flush toilets!" Our action, on the contrary, isn't concerned with the soul or the man *behind* the convict, but it seeks to obliterate the deep division that lies between innocence and guilt. This was Genet's emphasis with relation to the judge at the Soledad trial or the plane hijacked by the Palestinians in Jordan; the newspapers decried the fate of the judge and the poor tourists being held in the middle of the desert for no apparent reason. Genet, for his part, was saying: "But is the judge innocent and what of an American lady who can afford to be a tourist in this way?"

PHILIPPE: Does this mean that your primary objective is to

4. Radio Luxembourg.

raise consciousness and that you can neglect, for the moment, the struggle against political and economic institutions?

FOUCAULT: You have badly misunderstood me. If it were a question of raising consciousness, we could simply publish newspapers and books, or attempt to win over a radio or television producer. We wish to attack an institution at the point where it culminates and reveals itself in a simple and basic ideology, in the notions of good and evil, innocence and guilt. We wish to change this ideology which is experienced through those dense institutional layers where it has been invested, crystallized, and reproduced. More simply, humanism is based on the desire to change the ideological system without altering institutions; and reformers wish to change the institution without touching the ideological system. Revolutionary action, on the contrary, is defined as the simultaneous agitation of consciousness and institutions; this implies that we attack the relationships of power through the notions and institutions that function as their instruments, armature, and armor. Do you think that the teaching of philosophy—and its moral code—would remain unchanged if the penal system collapsed?

JEAN-PIERRE: We can also reverse the question. Could we imprison people in the present way if we changed the educational system? Most of all, we should not restrict our actions to a single sector where the movement bogs down in individual reforms. We should move from the educational system to the prisons, from the prisons to the asylum. Isn't this your basic intention?

FOUCAULT: We have already started interventions in the asylum, using methods similar to those employed in the prisons: a kind of aggressive enquiry formulated, at least in part, by those who are being investigated. The repressive role of the asylum is well known: people are locked up and subjected to treatment—chemical or psychological—over which they have no control; or they are subjected to the nontreatment of a straitjacket. But the influence of psychiatry extends beyond this to the activity of social workers, professional guidance counsellors, school psycho-

logists, and doctors who dispense psychiatric advice to their patients—all the psychiatric components of everyday life which form something like a third order of repression and policing. This infiltration is spreading throughout society, and this is not counting those psychiatrists who publish advice in the newspapers. The psychopathology of everyday life may reveal the unconscious facets of desire; the "psychiatrization" of everyday life, if it were closely examined, might reveal the invisible hand of power.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS: On what level do you plan to act? Can you address yourself to social workers?

FOUCAULT: No. We would like to work with students in the lycée, those whose education has been supervised, anyone who has been subjected to psychological or psychiatric repression in their choice of studies, in their relationships to their family, in their response to sexuality or drugs. We wish to know how they were divided, distributed, selected, and excluded in the name of psychiatry and of the normal individual, that is, in the name of humanism.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS: Aren't you interested in antipsychiatry, in working with psychiatrists in the asylum?

FOUCAULT: This is a task for psychiatrists, since entry into an asylum is restricted. We should, nevertheless, be careful that this movement directed against psychiatry, which opposes the idea of the asylum, does not ultimately serve to introduce psychiatry into the outside world by multiplying its interventions upon daily life.

FRÉDÉRIC: The situation in prisons is apparently worse, because the only relationships they sanction center on the conflict between the victims and the agents of repression: no "progressive" brutes will enlist in the movement. In the asylum, on the other hand, the struggle is being led by psychiatrists and not the victims: the agents of repression are fighting repression. Is this really an advantage?

FOUCAULT: I'm not sure. Unlike prison revolts, it is only with

great difficulty that a patient's rejection of the psychiatric hospital can become a collective and political action. The problem is to know whether patients subjected to the segregation of the asylum can stand against the institution and finally denounce the very division that designates and excludes them as mentally ill. Basaglia, the psychiatrist, attempted some experiments of this kind in Italy: he brought together the patients, the doctors, and the hospital personnel, but not to stage a sociodrama where each could expose his fantasies and re-enact the primal scene. Rather, he posed this question: could the victims of the asylum initiate a political struggle against the social structure that denounces them as mad? These experiments were savagely prohibited.

FRÉDÉRIC: The distinction between the normal and the pathological is even stronger than that between innocence and guilt.

FOUCAULT: They reinforce each other. When a judgment cannot be framed in terms of good and evil, it is stated in terms of normal and abnormal. And when it is necessary to justify this last distinction, it is done in terms of what is good or bad for the individual. These are expressions that signal the fundamental duality of Western consciousness.

In more general terms, this also means that we can't defeat the system through isolated actions; we must engage it on all fronts—the university, the prisons, and the domain of psychiatry—one after another since our forces are not strong enough for a simultaneous attack. We strike and knock against the most solid obstacles; the system cracks at another point; we persist. It seems that we're winning, but then the institution is rebuilt; we must start again. It is a long struggle; it is repetitive and seemingly incoherent. But the system it opposes, as well as the power exercised through the system, supplies its unity.

ALAIN: This is a tiresome question, but it must be faced eventually: what replaces the system?

FOUCAULT: I think that to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present system. This is perhaps what happened in the history of the Soviet Union: apparently, new institutions were in fact based on elements taken from an earlier

system—the Red Army reconstituted on the model of the Czarist army, the return to realism in art, and the emphasis on traditional family morality. The Soviet Union returned to the standards of bourgeois society in the nineteenth century, and perhaps, more as a result of Utopian tendencies than a concern for realities.

FRÉDÉRIC: I don't accept that. Marxism defined itself as scientific socialism as opposed to Utopian socialism. It refused to declare itself on the possible forms of future society. Soviet society was besieged by concrete problems, by the problems generated by the civil war. The war must be won and the factories must operate: consequently, its recourse to the only available and immediately effective models—the military hierarchy and the Taylor system.<sup>5</sup> If the Soviet Union has progressively assimilated the standards of bourgeois society, it is probably because they were the only ones available. It is not utopianism, but its absence, that is in question. Utopianism might have a key role to play.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS: The present movement may require a utopian model and a theoretical elaboration that goes beyond the sphere of partial and repressed experiences.

FOUCAULT: Why not the opposite? Reject theory and all forms of general discourse. This need for theory is still part of the system we reject.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS: You feel that the simple fact of employing a theory still relates to the dynamic of bourgeois knowledge?

FOUCAULT: Maybe so. I would rather oppose actual experiences than the possibility of a utopia. It is possible that the rough outline of a future society is supplied by the recent experiences with drugs, sex, communes, other forms of consciousness, and other forms of individuality. If scientific socialism emerged from the *Utopias* of the nineteenth century, it is possible that a real socialization will emerge, in the twentieth century, from *experiences*.

5. Frederick W. Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1911). Lenin, in a speech in 1919, advised the adoption of Taylor's time and study techniques.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS: The events of May were, of course, the experience of a certain power. But this experience essentially implied utopian discourse: May was a discourse occupying a space.

PHILIPPE: A discourse that was inadequate. The older ideas of the Left had only a marginal relationship to the aspirations liberated in May. The movement could have gone much further if it had been supported by an adequate theory, a thought capable of providing it with new perspectives.

FOUCAULT: I'm not convinced of this. But Jean-François has reason to speak of the experience of power. It is of the utmost importance that thousands of people exercised a power which did not assume the form of a hierarchical organization. Unfortunately, since power is by definition that which the ruling class abandons least readily and recaptures on the first occasion, it was impossible to maintain the experience for longer than a few weeks.

PHILIPPE: If I understand you correctly, you think that it's also useless or premature to create parallel circuits like the free universities in the United States that duplicate the institutions being attacked.

FOUCAULT: If you wish to replace an official institution by another institution that fulfills the same function—better and differently—then you are already being reabsorbed by the dominant structure.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS: I can't believe that the movement must remain at its present state, as this vague, unsubstantial, underground ideology that refuses to endorse any form of social work or community service, any action that requires going beyond the immediate group. It's unable to assume the responsibility for the whole of society, or it may be that it's incapable of conceiving of society as a whole.

FOUCAULT: You wonder if a global society could function without a general discourse on the basis of such divergent and dispersed experiences. I believe, on the contrary, that this particular idea of the "whole of society" derives from a utopian context.

This idea arose in the Western world, within this highly individualized historical development that culminates in capitalism. To speak of the "whole of society" apart from the only form it has ever taken is to transform our past into a dream. We readily believe that the least we can expect of experiences, actions, and strategies is that they take into account the "whole of society." This seems absolutely essential for their existence. But I believe that this is asking a great deal, that it means imposing impossible conditions on our actions because this notion functions in a manner that prohibits the actualization, success, and perpetuation of these projects. "The whole of society" is precisely that which should not be considered except as something to be destroyed. And then, we can only hope that it will never exist again.

FRÉDÉRIC: The social forms of Western culture were universalized as a "social whole" that is embodied by the state, and not necessarily because it stood as the best model, but because it has material power and superior efficiency. Our problem is that all successful revolts against the system succeeded by reinforcing similar kinds of organization—under partisan or state control—forms which exactly correspond to the dominant structure and which pose the essential question of power. This includes Leninism, but also the Maoist revolt: a popular organization and army against a bourgeois organization and army, dictatorship and the proletarian state. These instruments, initially conceived for taking power, must disappear after the transition stage. Of course, this is never the case as shown by the Bolshevik experience; and the cultural revolution in China was unable fully to eliminate them. As a condition for victory, they maintain their own dynamic which is quickly directed against the spontaneities they helped to liberate. Plainly a contradiction, and it may be the fundamental contradiction of revolutionary action.

FOUCAULT: What strikes me in your argument is that it takes the form of "until now." However, a revolutionary undertaking is directed not only against the present but against the rule of "until now."