

History, Discourse and Discontinuity* —

BY MICHEL FOUCAULT

(Translated by Anthony M. Nazzaro)

EDITOR'S NOTE: A few years ago, the editors of the French journal *ESPRIT* put to Michel Foucault a series of questions for which he was to write a series of responses. He decided instead to treat in depth one of the points raised, and by the way to bring up a number of other questions surely worthy of careful attention. The editors of this volume consider the document prepared by M. Foucault a major contribution to the consideration of problems with which we are deeply engaged. Though it does not address itself directly to the issue of *Psychological Man*, it represents an implicit critique of perspectives developed in this volume, and recommends to us alternative modes for getting at our central issues.

Here, then, is the question M. Foucault chose to deal with. The essay that follows is his reply. — R.B.

Doesn't a thought which introduces constraint of the system and discontinuity in the history of the mind remove all basis for a progressive political intervention? Does it not lead to the following dilemma:

- either the acceptance of the system,
- or the appeal to an uncontrolled event, to the irruption of exterior violence which alone is capable of upsetting the system?

I have chosen the last of the questions put to me (not without regret for abandoning the others):

- 1) because at first glance it surprised me, and because I became quickly convinced that it concerned the very core of my work;
- 2) because it allowed me to offer at least a few of the answers which I would have liked to give for the others;
- 3) because it gave expression to questioning which no theoretical work can today eschew.

* First English translation of "Réponse à une question," *ESPRIT*, May, 1968.

I must admit that you have characterized with extreme accuracy what I have undertaken to do, and that you have at the same time singled out the point of inevitable discord: "to introduce constraint of the system and discontinuity in the history of the mind." Yes, I recognize this almost entirely. Yes, I recognize that this is an almost unjustifiable statement. With diabolical pertinency you have succeeded in giving a definition of my work to which I cannot avoid subscribing, but for which no one would, reasonably, ever wish to assume responsibility. I suddenly sense how bizarre my position is, how strange and hardly justifiable. And I now perceive how much this work, which was no doubt somewhat solitary, but always patient, with no other law but its own and sufficiently carried out, I thought, to be able to stand by itself, has deviated in relation to the best-established norms, how discordant it was.

However, two or three details in the very accurate definition which you propose bother me, preventing me from (perhaps allowing me to avoid) agreeing completely with it.

First of all you use the word *system* in the singular. Now, I am a pluralist. Here's what I mean. (You will allow me, I think, to speak not only of my last book, but also of those which preceded it; this is because together they form a cluster of research whose themes and chronological reference points are quite adjacent; also because each one constitutes a descriptive experiment which is opposed to and therefore relates to the other two by a certain number of traits.) I am a pluralist: the problem which I have set myself is that of the *individualization* of discourses. There exist for individualizing the discourses criteria which are known and reliable (or almost): the linguistic system to which they belong, the identity of the subject which has articulated them. But other criteria, which are not less familiar, are much more enigmatic. When one speaks of *psychiatry*, or of *medicine*, or of *grammar*, or of *biology*, or of *economics*, what is one speaking of? What are these curious entities which one believes he can recognize at first glance, but whose limits one would be at a loss to define? Some of these units seem to go back to the dawn of human history (medicine as well as mathematics), whereas others have appeared recently (economics, psychiatry), and still others have perhaps disappeared (casuistry). To these units new terms are endlessly added and they are constantly modified by them (the strange units of sociology and psychology which since their appear-

ance have not ceased to start afresh). There are units which are obstinately maintained after so many errors, neglect, so much innovation, so many metamorphoses and which sometimes undergo such radical mutations that one would have difficulty in considering them as identical to themselves (how can one affirm that economics remains the same, uninterrupted, from the physiocrats to Keynes?).

Perhaps there are discourses which can at each moment redefine their own individuality (for example, mathematics can reinterpret at each point in time the totality of its history); but in each of the cases that I have cited, the discourse cannot restore the totality of its history within the unity of a strict framework. There remain two traditional recourses. The historical-transcendental recourse: an attempt to find, beyond all historical manifestation and historical origin, a primary foundation, the opening of an inexhaustible horizon, a plan which would move backward in time in relation to every event, and which would maintain throughout history the constantly unwinding plan of an unending unity. The empirical or psychological recourse: seeking out the founder, interpreting what he meant, detecting the implicit meanings which were lying silent and dormant in his discourse, following the thread or the destiny of these meanings, describing the traditions and the influences, fixing the moment of awakenings, of lapses, of awareness, of crises, of changes in the mind, the sensitivity or the interest of men. Now it seems to me that the first of these recourses is tautological, the second extrinsic and unessential. It is by marking out and by systematizing their very character that I would like to attempt to individualize the large units which scan simultaneously or successively the world of our discourses.

I have retained three groups of criteria:

1) The criteria of *formation*. What permits us to individualize a discourse such as political economy or general grammar, is not the unity of an object; it is not a formal structure; nor is it a conceptual coherent architecture; it is not a fundamental philosophical choice; it is rather the existence of rules of formation for all its objects (however scattered they may be), for all its operations (which often can neither be superimposed nor linked together in succession), for all its concepts (which may very well be incompatible), for all its theoretical options (which are often mutually

exclusive). There is an individualized discursive formation every time one can define a similar set of rules.

2) The criteria of *transformation* or of *threshold*. I shall say that natural history (or psycho-pathology) are units of discourse, if I can define the conditions which must have been brought together at a very precise moment of time, in order that its objects, its operations, its concepts and its theoretical options could be formed; if I can define what internal modifications it was capable of; finally if I can define from what threshold of transformation new rules have been brought into play.

3) The criteria of *correlation*. I will say that clinical medicine is an autonomous discursive formation if I can define the whole of the relations which define it and situate it among the other types of discourse (as biology, chemistry, political theory or the analysis of society) and in the nondiscursive context in which it functions (institutions, social relations, economic and political circumstances).

These criteria allow us to substitute differentiated analyses for the broad themes of general history (whether it concern "the progress of reason" or "the spirit of a century"). They allow us to describe, as *epistemic* of a period, not the sum of its knowledge, nor the general style of its research, but the deviation, the distances, the oppositions, the differences, the relations of its multiple scientific discourses: the *epistemic* is not a sort of *grand underlying theory*, it is a space of *dispersion*, it is an *open field of relationships and no doubt indefinitely describable*. They allow us furthermore to describe not broad history which would carry off all the sciences in a single swoop, but the types of history — that is to say, what was retained and transformed — which characterize the different discourses (the history of mathematics does not follow the same model as the history of biology, which does not follow the model of psycho-pathology either): *the epistemic is not a slice of history* common to all the sciences: it is a *simultaneous play of specific remanences*. Finally they allow us to situate the different thresholds in their respective place: for nothing proves in advance (and nothing demonstrates after examination either) that their chronology is the same for all types of discourse; the threshold which one can describe for the analysis of language at the beginning of the nineteenth century has doubtless no counterpart in the history of mathematics; and, what is more paradoxical, the threshold of formation for political economy (noted by Ricardo)

does not coincide with the constitution — by Marx — of an analysis of society and of history.¹ *The Epistemic is not a general stage of reason; it is a complex relationship of successive displacement in time.*

Nothing, you see, is more foreign to me than the quest for a constraining sovereign and unique form. I do not seek to detect, starting from diverse signs, the unitary spirit of an epoch, the general form of its conscience: something like a *Weltanschauung*. Nor have I described either the emergence and eclipse of a formal structure which might reign for a time over all the manifestations of thought: I have not written the history of a transcendental syncope [??].* Nor, finally, have I described thoughts or century-old sensitivities coming to life, stuttering, struggling and dying out like great phantoms — like souls playing out their shadow theater against the backdrop of history. I have studied, one after another, whole sets of discourses; I have characterized them; I have defined the play of rules, of transformations, of thresholds, of remanences. I have compounded them, I have described clusters of relationships. Wherever I have deemed it necessary I have allowed the *systems* to proliferate.

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You say, a thought which “emphasizes discontinuity.” This, indeed, is a notion whose importance today — amongst historians as with linguists — cannot be underestimated. But the use of the singular does not appear to me to be entirely suitable. Here again, I am a pluralist. My problem is to substitute the analysis of *different types of transformation* for the abstract general and wearisome form of “change” in which one so willingly thinks in terms of succession. This implies two things: setting aside the old forms of weak continuity through which one ordinarily attenuates the raw fact of change (tradition, influence, habits of thought, broad mental forms, constraints of the human mind), and stubbornly stressing instead the lively intensity of the difference: establishing meticulously the deviation. Next, discarding all the psychological explanations of change (the genius of the great inventors, crises of conscience, the appearance of a new form of mind); and defining with the greatest care the transformations which have — I don’t say provoked — but

* Translator’s Note.

¹ This fact, already pointed out by Oscar Lange, explains at once the limited and so perfectly circumscribed place which the concepts of Marx occupy in the epistemological field which extends from Petty to contemporary econometrics, and the founding character of these same concepts for a theory of history.

constituted the change. Replacing, in short, the theme of *becoming* (general form, abstract element, primary cause and universal effect, a confused mixture of the identical and the new) by the analysis of the *transformations* in their specifics.

(1) *Within* a given discursive formation, detecting the changes which affect the objects, the operations, the concepts, the theoretical options. Thus, one can distinguish (I limit myself to the example of *general grammar*): the changes by deduction or implication (the theory of verb-copula implied the distinction between a substantive root and a verbal inflexion); the changes by generalization (extension to the verb of the theory of word designation, and consequent disappearance of the verb-copula theory); the changes by limitation (the concept of attribute is specified by the notion of complement); the changes by passing to the complementary (from the project of constructing a universal and readily understood language is derived the search for the hidden secrets of the most primitive of languages); the changes by passing to the other term of an alternative (primacy of vowels or primacy of consonants in the constitution of roots); the changes through permutation of dependencies (one can establish the theory of the verb on the theory of the noun or inversely); the changes by exclusion or inclusion (the analysis of languages as systems of representative signs renders obsolete the search for their relationship which is reintroduced, on the other hand, by the quest of a primitive language).

These different types of change constitute in themselves altogether the whole of the characteristic *derivations* of a discursive formation.

(2) Detecting the changes which affect the discursive formations *themselves*:

—displacement of boundaries which define the field of possible objects (the medical object at the beginning of the 19th century ceases to be taken in a surface of classification; it is marked out in the three dimensional space of the body);

—new position and new role of the speaking subject in the discourse (the subject in the discourse of the naturalists of the 18th century becomes exclusively a *looking* subject following a grid, and *noting* according to a code; it ceases to be listening, interpreting, deciphering);

—new function of language with respect to objects (beginning with Tournefort the role of the discourse of the naturalist is not to

penetrate into things, to capture from them the language which they secretly enclose, nor to bring it to light; but to extend a surface of transcription where the form, the number, the size and the disposition of elements can be translated in a univocal manner);

—new form of localization and of circulation of the discourse in society (the clinical discourse is not formulated in the same places, it does not have the same recording procedures, it is not diffused, it is not cumulative, it is not conserved nor is it contested in the same way as the medical discourse of the 18th century.).

All these changes of a type superior to the preceding ones define the transformations which affect the discursive areas themselves: *mutations*.

(3) Finally, the third type of changes, those which affect simultaneously several discursive formations:

—reversal in the hierarchical order (the analysis of language had, during the classical period, a directing role which it has lost, in the first years of the 19th century, to the advantage of biology);

—change in the nature of the directing role (classical grammar, as a general theory of signs, guaranteed in other areas the transposition of an instrument of analysis; in the 19th century, biology assures the “metaphorical” importation of a certain number of concepts: organisms - organization; function - social function; life - life of words or of languages);

—functional displacements: the theory of the continuity of beings which, in the 18th century depended upon the philosophical discourse, is taken over in the 19th century by the scientific discourse.

All these transformations of a type superior to the two others characterize the changes peculiar to epistemic itself.

Redistributions.

There you have a small number (about fifteen perhaps) of different changes which one can assign concerning discourses. You see why I would prefer that one say that I have stressed not discontinuity, but *the discontinuities* (that is to say, the different transformations which it is possible to describe concerning two states of discourse). But the important thing for me, now, is not to establish an exhaustive typology of these transformations.

1) The important thing is to offer as the content of the wearisome and empty concept of “change” a play of specified modifications. The history of “ideas” or of “sciences” must not be the list of innova-

tions, but the descriptive analysis of the different transformations effectuated.²

2) What is important to me is not to confuse such an analysis with a psychological diagnosis. It is legitimate to ask oneself whether the person whose work bears such an ensemble of modifications had genius or what had been the experiences of his early infancy. But it is another thing to describe the field of possibilities, the form of operations, the types of transformations which characterize his discursive practice.

3) What is important to me is to show that there are not on the one hand inert discourses, already more than half dead, and then, on the other hand, an all-powerful subject which manipulates them, upsets them, renews them; but that the discoursing subjects belong to the discursive field — they have their place there (and possibilities of their displacements), their function (and possibilities of their functional mutation). The discourse is not the place where pure subjectivity irrupts; it is a space of positions and of differentiated functionings for the subjects.

4) What is important to me above all is to define amongst all these transformations the play of dependencies.

— *intradiscursive* dependencies (between the objects, the operations, the concepts of a same formation).

— *interdiscursive* dependencies (between different discursive formations: such as the correlations which I have studied in *Les mots et les choses* [*Words and Things*] between natural history, economics, grammar and the theory of representation).

— *extradiscursive* dependencies (between discursive transformations and others which have been produced elsewhere than in the discourse: such as the correlations studied in *l'Histoire de la folie* [*History of Madness*] and in *La naissance de la clinique* [*Birth of the Hospital*] between the medical discourse and a whole play of economic, political and social changes).

I would like to substitute this whole play of dependencies for the uniform, simple notion of assigning causality; and by eliminating the prerogative of the endlessly accompanying cause, bring out the bundle of polymorphous correlations.

As you see, there is absolutely no question of substituting a “dis-

² In which I follow the examples of the method given on several occasions by M. Canguilhem.

continuous” category for the no less abstract and general one of the “continuous.” I am attempting, on the contrary, to show that discontinuity is not a monotonous and unthinkable void between events, a void which one must hasten to fill (two perfectly symmetrical solutions) with the dismal plentitude of the cause or by the suppleness and agility of the mind; but that it is a play of specific transformations different from one another (each one having its conditions, its rules, its level) and linked among themselves according to schemes of dependence. History is the descriptive analysis and the theory of these transformations.

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A last point on which I hope to be able to be more brief. You use the expression: “history of the mind.” In fact, I intended rather to write a history of discourse. What’s the difference?, you’ll ask. “You do not study the texts which you take as raw material according to their grammatical structure: you do not describe the semantic field which they cover: it is not language which is your object. And so? What do you seek if not to discover the thought which animates them and to reconstitute the representations of which they have given a durable translation, perhaps, but undoubtedly an unfaithful one? What do you seek if not to rediscover behind them the intention of the men who have formulated them, the meanings which, voluntarily or unbeknownst to them, they have deposited therein, this imperceptible supplement to the linguistic system which is something like the beginning of liberty or the history of the mind?”

Therein lies, perhaps, the essential point. You are right: what I am analyzing in the discourse is not the system of its language, nor, in a general way, the formal rules of its construction: for I do not care about knowing what renders it legitimate or gives it its intelligibility and allows it to serve in communication. The question which I ask is not that of codes but of events: the law of existence of the terms, that which has rendered them possible — they and no other in their place: the conditions of their particular emergence; their correlation with other previous or simultaneous events, discursive or not. This question, however, I try to answer without referring to the awareness, obscure or explicit, of the speaking subjects; without relating the facts of discourse to the will — perhaps involuntary — of their authors; without invoking that intention of saying which is always excessive

in relation to what is said; without trying to seize hold of the inaudible when a word doesn't occur in the text.

So that what I am doing is neither a formalization nor an exegesis. But an *archeology*: that is to say, as its name indicates only too obviously, the description of the *record*. By this word, I do not mean the mass of texts which have been collected at a given period, or chanced to have survived oblivion from this period. I mean all the rules which at a given period and for a definite society defined:

1) the limits and the forms of *expressibility*: what is it possible to speak of? What has been constituted as the field of discourse? What type of discursivity has been appropriated to such and such a domain (what has been designated as the subject; what has one wished to make a descriptive science of; to what has one given a literary formulation, etc.)?

2) the limits and the forms of *conservation*: what are the terms destined to disappear without any trace? Which ones are destined, on the other hand, to enter into the memory of men through ritualistic recitation, pedagogy and teaching, entertainment or holiday, publicity? Which ones are noted for being capable of re-use, and toward what ends? Which ones are put in circulation and in what groups? Which are those which are repressed and censured?

3) the limits and the forms of *memory* such as it appears in the different discursive formations: which are the terms which everyone recognizes as valid or questionable, or definitely invalid? Which ones have been abandoned as negligible and which ones have been excluded as foreign? What types of relationships are established between the system of present terms and the body of past terms?

4) the limits and the forms of *reactivation*: amongst the discourses of previous epochs or of foreign cultures, which are the ones that are retained, which are valued, which are imported, which one tries to reconstitute? And what does one do with them, what transformations does one impose upon them (commentary, exegesis, analysis), what system of appreciation does one apply to them, what role does one give them to play?

5) the limits and the forms of *appropriation*: what individuals, what groups, what classes have access to such a kind of discourse? In what way is the relationship between the discourse and he who gives it, and he who receives it institutionalized? In what way is the relationship of the discourse to its author shown and defined?

How does the struggle for the taking over of the discourse take place between classes, nations, linguistic, cultural or ethnic collectivities?

It is against this background that the analyses which I have begun are set; it is towards it that they are directed. I am writing, therefore, not a history of the mind, according to the succession of its forms or according to the thickness of its deposited meanings. I do not question the discourses concerning what silently they mean, but on the fact and the conditions of their manifest appearance; not on the contents which they may conceal, but on the transformations which they have effectuated; not on the meaning which is maintained in them like a perpetual origin, but on the field where they coexist, remain and disappear. It is a question of an analysis of the discourses in their exterior dimensions. From whence arise three consequences:

1) Treat the past discourse not as a theme for a *commentary* which would revive it, but as a *monument*³ to be described in its characteristic disposition.

2) Seek in the discourse not its laws of construction, as do the structural methods, but its conditions of existence.⁴

3) Refer the discourse not to the thought, to the mind or to the subject which might have given rise to it, but to the practical field in which it is deployed.

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Excuse me for being so lengthy, so laborious, just to propose three slight changes in your definition and to ask your agreement, so that we may speak about my work as an attempt to introduce "diversity of the systems and the play of *discontinuities* in the history of the discourses." Do not imagine that I want to distort the issue; or that I seek to avoid the point of your question by discussing its terms *ad infinitum*. But prior agreement was necessary. Now I have my back to the wall. I must answer.

Certainly not the question of whether *I* am a reactionary; nor whether my texts *are* (in themselves, intrinsically, through a certain number of well-coded signs). You ask me a much more serious question, the only one, I believe, which can legitimately be asked. You question me on the *relationships* between what I say and a certain political practice.

³ I borrow this word from M. Canguilhem. He describes, better than I have done myself, what I have wished to do.

⁴ Is it necessary to specify again that I am not what is called a "structuralist"?

It seems to me that two answers can be offered to this question. One concerns the critical operations which my discourse carries out in its own domain (the history of ideas, of sciences, of thought, of knowledge . . .): was what it puts out of circulation indispensable to a progressive politics? The other concerns the field of analysis and the realm of objects which my discourse attempts to bring out: how can they be articulated in the exercise of a progressive politics?

I shall sum up as follows the critical operations which I have undertaken:

1) *To establish limits* where the history of thought, in its traditional form, gave itself a limitless space. In particular:

a) to challenge again the great interpretive postulate according to which the reign of the discourse would have no designated boundaries; mute things and silence itself would be peopled with words: and where no word can be heard anymore one would be able still to hear the deeply varied murmur of the meaning; in what men do not say they would continue to speak; a world of slumbering texts would await us in the blank pages of our history. In opposition to this theme I would like to substitute the notion that the discourses are limited practical domains which have their boundaries, their rules of formation, their conditions of existence: the historical base of the discourse is not a more profound discourse — at once identical and different;

b) to challenge again the theme of a sovereign subject which would come from the outside to animate the inertia of the linguistic codes, and which would deposit in the discourse the indelible trace of its liberty; to challenge again the theme of a subjectivity which would constitute the meanings and then would transcribe them into the discourse. In opposition to these themes I would like to substitute pin-pointing the origin of the roles and of the operations exercised by the different “discoursing” subjects.

c) to challenge again the theme of the indefinitely receding origin, and the idea that in the realm of thought, the role of history is to awaken what has been forgotten, to eliminate the occultations, to erase — or to obstruct again — the barriers. In opposition to this theme I would like to substitute the analysis of discursive systems, historically defined, to which one can fix thresholds, and assign conditions of birth and disappearance.

In a word, to establish these limits, to question again these three

themes of the origin, the subject and the implicit meaning, is to undertake — a difficult task, very strong resistance indeed proves it — to liberate the discursive field from the historical-transcendental structure which the philosophy of the nineteenth century has imposed on it.

2) *To eliminate ill-considered oppositions.* Here are a few of them in their order of increasing importance: the opposition between the liveliness of innovations and the dead weight of tradition, the inertia of acquired knowledge or the old tracings of thought; the opposition between the average forms of knowledge (which would represent its everyday mediocrity) and its deviating forms (which would manifest the singularity or the solitude characteristic of genius); the opposition between periods of stability or of universal convergence and moments of effervescence when consciences enter into crisis, when sensibilities are metamorphosed, when all notions are revised, overturned, revived, or for an indefinite time, fall into disuse. For all these dichotomies I would like to substitute the analysis of the field of simultaneous differences (which define at a given period the possible dispersal of knowledge) and of successive differences (which define the whole of the transformations, their hierarchy, their dependence, their level). Whereas one used to relate the history of tradition and of invention, of the old and the new, of the dead and the living, of the closed and the open, of the static and of the dynamic, I undertake to relate the history of the perpetual difference; more precisely, to relate the history of ideas as the sum total of the specified and descriptive forms of the non-identity. And thus I would like to free it of the triple metaphor which has encumbered it for more than a century (the evolutionist, which imposes upon it the division between the regressive and the adaptive; the biological which separates the inert from the living; the dynamic which opposes movement and immobility).

3) *To lift the restriction* which has been directed at the discourse in its very existence (and therein lies, for me, the most important of the critical operations that I have undertaken). This restriction consists of several aspects:

a) never treating the discourse except as an unimportant element without its own consistency nor inherent laws (a pure translation surface for mute things; a simple place of expression for thoughts, imagination, knowledge, unconscious themes);

b) recognizing in the discourse only the patterns of a psychological and individualizing model (the work of an author, and — why not? — his juvenalia or his mature work), the patterns of a linguistic or rhetorical model (a genre, a style), the patterns of a semantic model (an idea, a theme);

c) admitting that all the operations are made before the discourse and outside of it (in the ideality of thought or in the serious realm of mute practices); that the discourse, consequently, is but a slight addition which adds an almost impalpable fringe to things and to the mind; a surplus which *goes without saying*, since it does nothing else except to say what has been said.

To this restriction, I would object that the discourse is not nothing or almost nothing. And what it is — what defines its own consistency, what allows one to make an historical analysis of it — is not what one “meant” to say (that obscure and heavy weight of intentions which supposedly weighs, in the shadow, with a much greater heaviness than the things said); it is not what has remained silent (those imposing things which do not speak, but which leave their traceable marks, their black profile against the light surface of what is said): the discourse is constituted by the difference between what one could say correctly at one period (according to the rules of grammar and those of logic) and what is actually said. The discursive field is, at a specific moment, the law of this difference. It thus defines a certain number of operations which do not belong to the order of linguistic construction or of formal deduction. It deploys a “neutral” domain in which speech and writing can cause the system of their opposition and the difference of their functioning to vary. It appears as a whole group of practical rules which do not consist simply in giving a visible and exterior body to the inner agility of thought, nor in offering to the solidity of things the reflecting surface which will duplicate them. At the bottom of this restriction which has weighed upon the discourse (to the advantage of the thought-language, history-truth, word-writing, words-things opposition), there was the refusal to recognize that in the discourse something is formed (according to well-definable rules); that this something exists, subsists, changes, disappears (according to rules equally definable); in short, that, side by side with all which a society can produce (“side by side”: that is to say, in a relationship which can be assigned to all that), there is

formation and transformation of “things said.” It is the history of these “things said” that I have undertaken.

4) Finally, the last critical task (which sums up and embraces all the others): *freeing from their uncertain status* this ensemble of disciplines which one calls history of ideas, history of sciences, history of thought, history of knowledge, of concepts or of conscience. This certainty manifests itself in several ways:

—difficulties in limiting the domains: where does the history of sciences end, where does the history of opinions and beliefs begin? How are the history of concepts and the history of notions or themes to be separated? Where lies the boundary between the history of knowledge and that of the imagination?

—difficulty in defining the nature of the object: does one write the history of what has been known, acquired, forgotten, or the history of mental forms, or the history of their interference? Does one write the history of characteristic features which are held in common by men of one period or of one culture? Does one describe a collective spirit? Does one analyze the (teleological or genetic) history of reason?

—difficulty in assigning the relationship between these facts of thought or of knowledge and the other areas of historical analysis: must one treat them as signs of something else (of a social relationship, of a political situation, of an economic determination)? Or as their result? Or as their refraction through a consciousness? Or as the symbolic expression of their total form?

For so many uncertainties I would like to substitute the analysis of the discourse itself in its conditions of formation, in the series of its modifications, and in the play of its dependencies and of its correlations. The discourse would thus appear in a describable relationship with the whole of other practices. Instead of having to deal with an economic, social, political history embracing a history of thought (which would be its expression and something like its duplicate), instead of having to deal with a history of ideas which would be referred (either through a play of signs and of expressions, or by relations of causality) to extrinsic conditions, one would be dealing with a history of discursive practices in the specific relationships which link them to the other practices. There is no question of composing a *global history* — which would regroup all its elements around one principle or one unique form —, but rather of opening

up the field of a *general history* in which one could describe the peculiarity of practices, the play of their relations, the form of their dependencies. And it is in the area of this general history that the historical analysis of discursive practices could be circumscribed as a discipline.

These, then, are more or less the critical operations that I have undertaken. Now allow me to call you to witness the question that I ask of those who might become alarmed: "Is a progressive politics linked (in its theoretical thinking) to the themes of meaning, of origin, of the constituent subject, in short, to all the themes which guarantee to history the inexhaustible presence of the Logos, the sovereignty of a pure subject, and the profound teleology of an original destination? Is a progressive politics bound to such a form of analysis — or with its being challenged? And is such a politics bound to all the dynamic, biological, evolutionary metaphors through which one masks the difficult problem of historical change — or, on the contrary, to their meticulous destruction? And further: is there some necessary relationship between a progressive politics and the refusal to recognize in the discourse anything else except a thin transparency which flickers for a moment at the limit of things and of thoughts, then disappears immediately? Can one believe that this politics has any interest in rehashing one more time the theme — I would have thought that the existence and the practice of the revolutionary discourse in Europe for more than 200 years might have been able to free us from it — that words are just air, an exterior whispering, a sound of wings which one hears with difficulty in the seriousness of history and the silence of thought? Finally must one think that a progressive politics is linked to the devaluation of discursive practices, so that a history of the mind, of conscience, of reason, of knowledge, of ideas or opinions might triumph in its certain ideality?"

It seems to me that I perceive, on the other hand — and quite clearly — the perilous ease which the politics you speak of would assume, if it gave itself the guarantee of a primitive foundation or if a transcendental teleology, if it persistently transformed time into metaphors through the images of life or the models of movement, if it renounced the difficult task of a general analysis of practices, of their relations, of their transformations, to take refuge in a global history of totalities, of expressive relationships, of symbolic values and

of all those secret meanings in which thoughts and things are enveloped.

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You have a right to say to me: "This is all very well: the critical operations which you are making are not as blameworthy as they might appear at first glance. But, after all, how can this work of a termite on the origin of philology, of economics, or of pathological anatomy concern politics, and be included among the problems which pertain to it today? There was a time when philosophers did not devote themselves with so great a zeal to the dust of archives . . ." To which I will answer, more or less: "There exists today a problem which is not without importance for political practice: the problem of the laws, of the conditions of exercise, of functioning, of the institutionalizing of scientific discourses. That's what I have undertaken to analyze historically — by choosing the discourses which have, not the strongest epistemological structure (mathematics or physics), but the densest and most complex field of positivity (medicine, economics, social sciences)."

Take a simple example: the formation of the clinical discourse which has characterized medicine from the beginning of the 19th century until the present, approximately. I have chosen it because we are dealing with a very definite, historical fact, and because one cannot refer its establishment back to some remote origin; because it would be very irresponsible to denounce it as a "pseudo-science"; and above all because it is easy to grasp "intuitively" the relationship between this scientific mutation and a certain number of precise political events: those which one groups — even on the European scale — under the title of the French Revolution. The problem is to give to this still vague relationship an analytical content.

First hypothesis: it is the conscience of men which has become modified (under the influence of economic, social, political changes); and their view of illness has, by this very fact, been altered: they have recognized its political consequences (uneasiness, discontent, revolts in populations whose health is deficient); they have perceived its economic implications (the desire of employers to have at their disposal a healthy work force; the wish of the bourgeoisie in power to transfer to the State the expenses of assistance); they have therein transposed their conception of society (a single medicine with a universal value, with two distinct fields of application: the

hospital for the poor classes; the free and competitive practice for the rich); they have therein transcribed their new conception of the world: desacralization of the corpse, which has permitted autopsies; a greater importance accorded the living body as an instrument of work; the concern for health replacing the preoccupation with salvation. In all this, there are many things which are true; but, on the one hand, they do not account for the formation of a scientific discourse; and, on the other hand, they could only have come into existence, and with the effects that one has been able to establish, to the extent that the medical discourse had received a new standard.

Second hypothesis: the fundamental notions of clinical medicine would be derived, by transposition, from a political practice or at least from the theoretical forms in which it is reflected. The ideas of organic solidarity, of functional cohesion, of tissularly communication, the abandonment of the principle of classification in favor of an analysis of the whole body corresponded to a political practice which revealed, beneath stratifications which were still feudal, social relationships of the functional and economic type. Or else, do not the refusal to see in sicknesses a large family of almost botanical species, and the effort to find the pathological juncture, its mechanism of development, its cause and, in the final analysis, its therapeutic, correspond to the project, in the ruling social class, of no longer controlling the world by theoretical knowledge alone, but by a mass of applicable knowledge, its decision to accept no longer as nature that which would be imposed upon her as a limit and as an evil? Such analyses do not appear to me to be pertinent either, because they avoid the essential problem: what should be, in the midst of the other discourses, and in a general way, of the other practices, the mode of existence and function of the medical discourse in order that such transpositions or such correspondences are produced?

That is why I would change the point of attack in relation to the traditional analyses. If indeed there is a link between political practice and the medical discourse, it is not, it seems to me, because this practice changed, initially, the conscience of men, their manner of perceiving things or of conceiving of the world, and then finally the form of their knowledge and its content; nor is it because this was reflected at first, in a manner more or less clear and systematic, in concepts, notions or themes which have been subsequently imported into medicine. It is in a much more direct manner: political practice

has transformed not the meaning or the form of the discourse, but the conditions of its emergence, insertion and functioning; it has transformed the mode of existence of the medical discourse. And this has come about through a certain number of operations described elsewhere and which I sum up here: new criteria to designate those who receive by law the right to hold a medical discourse; new division of the medical object through the application of another scale of observation which is superimposed on the first without erasing it (sickness observed statistically on the level of a population); new law of assistance which creates a hospital space for observation and surgery (space which is organized, furthermore, according to an economic principle, since the sick person benefitting from the care must compensate through the medical lesson which he gives; he pays for the right of being cared for by the obligation of being examined, and this goes up to, and includes, death); a new mode of registering, of preserving, of accumulating, of diffusing and of teaching the medical discourse (which must no longer express the experience of the physician but constitute, first of all, a document on illness); new functioning of the medical discourse in the system of administrative and political control of the population (society as society is considered and "treated" according to the categories of health and pathology.).

Now — and here's where the analysis becomes complex — these transformations in the conditions of existence and functioning of the discourse are neither "reflected" nor "translated" nor "expressed" in the concepts, the methods or the data of medicine: they modify its rules of formation. What is transformed by political practice is not the medical "objects" (political practice does not change, this is quite evident, the "morbid species" into "lesional infections"), but the system which offers to the medical discourse a possible object (whether it be a population surveyed and indexed, whether it be a total pathological evolution in an individual whose antecedents have been established and whose disturbances or their abatement are daily observed, whether it be an anatomical autopsied area); what is transformed by political practice is not the methods of analysis but the system of their formation (administrative recording of illnesses, of deaths, of their causes, of admissions and dismissals from hospital, setting up of archives, relations between medical personnel and patients in the hospital field); what has been transformed by political practice is not the concepts but their system of formation: the substitution of

the concept of "tissue" for that of "solid" is obviously not the result of a political change; but what political practice has modified is the system of formation of the concepts: for the intermittent notation of the effects of illness, and for the hypothetical designation of a functional cause, it has allowed the substitution of a tight, almost continual, anatomical graph supported in depth, and local points of reference of anomalies, of their field of dispersion and of their eventual routes of diffusion. The haste with which one ordinarily relates the contents of a scientific discourse to a political practice hides, in my mind, the level where the articulation can be described in precise terms.

It seems to me, that starting from such an analysis, one can understand:

1) how to describe a whole group of relations between a scientific discourse and a political practice, the details of which it is possible to follow and whose subordination one can grasp. Very direct relations since they no longer have to pass through the conscience of the speaking subjects nor through the efficacy of thought. Yet, indirect relations since the data of a scientific discourse can no longer be considered as the immediate expression of a social rapport or of an economic situation.

2) how to assign the proper role of political practice in relation to a scientific discourse. It does not have a thaumaturgic role of creation: it does not bring forth sciences out of nothing; it transforms the conditions of existence and the systems of functioning of the discourse. These changes are not arbitrary nor "free": they operate in a realm which has its own configuration and which consequently does not offer limitless possibilities of modification. The political practice does not reduce to nothing the consistency of the discursive field in which it operates.

Nor does it have a universal, critical role. It is not in the name of a political practice that one can judge the scientific quality of a science (unless the latter claims to be, in one way or another, a theory of politics). But in the name of a political practice one can question the mode of existence and the functioning of a science.

3) how the relations between a political practice and a discursive field can be articulated in turn on relations of another order. Thus medicine, at the beginning of the 19th century, is at once linked to a political practice (on a mode which I analyzed in *La Naissance de la*

clinique [*The Birth of the Hospital*]), and to a whole group of “interdiscursive” changes which were simultaneously produced in several disciplines (substitutions for an analysis of the order and of taxonomical characters, of an analysis of solidarities, of functionings, of successive series, which I have described in *Les mots et les choses* [*Words and Things*]).

4) how phenomena which one is in the habit of placing in the foreground (influence, communication of models, transfer and metaphorization of concepts) find their historical condition of possibility in these first modifications: for example, the importation, in the analysis of society, of biological concepts such as those of organism, of function, of evolution, even of sickness, played, in the 19th century, the role which one recognizes (much more important, much more ideologically loaded than the “naturalist” comparisons of preceding periods) only in proportion to the regulation given to the medical discourse by political practice.

Through this very long example I am anxious to show you but one thing: how what I am attempting to bring out through my analysis — the *positivity* of discourses, their conditions of existence, the systems which regulate their emergence, their functioning and their transformations — can concern political practice; to show you what this practice can do with it; to convince you that by outlining this theory of the scientific discourse, by making it appear as an ensemble of regulated practices, being articulated in an analyzable fashion upon other practices, I am not just enjoying myself by making the game more complicated for certain spirited souls. I am trying to define in what way, to what extent, to what level the discourse, and particularly the scientific discourses, can be objects of a political practice, and in what system of dependency they can be in relation to it.

Allow me once more to call you to witness the question I ask: Isn't this politics well known which answers in terms of thought or conscience, in terms of pure ideality or psychological traits, when one speaks to it of a practice, of its conditions, of its rules, of its historical changes? Isn't this politics well known which, since the beginning of the 19th century, stubbornly persists in seeing in the immense domain of practice only the epiphany of a triumphant reason, or in deciphering in it only the historic-transcendental destination of the West? And more precisely: does the refusal to analyze

the conditions of existence and the rules of formation of the scientific discourses, in what they possess both specific and dependent, not condemn all politics to a perilous choice: either to place upon a mode which one can, indeed, call, if one wishes, “technocratic,” the validity and efficacy of a scientific discourse, whatever may be the real conditions of its exercise and the whole of the practices upon which it is articulated (thus establishing the scientific discourse as a universal rule for all the other practices, without taking into account the fact that it is itself a regulated and conditioned practice); or else, to intervene directly in the discursive field, as if it didn’t have its own consistency, making of it the raw material of a psychological inquisition (judging what is said by the who says it), or practicing the symbolic valorization of the notions (by discerning in a science the concepts which are “reactionary” and those which are “progressive”).

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I should like to conclude by submitting several hypotheses to you:
 — A progressive politics is one which recognizes the historic conditions and the specified rules of a practice, whereas other politics recognize only ideal necessities, univocal determinations, or the free play of individual initiatives.

— A progressive politics is one which defines in a practice the possibilities of transformations and the play of dependencies between these transformations, whereas other politics rely on the uniform abstraction of change or the thaumaturgical presence of genius.

— A progressive politics does not make of man or of conscience or of the subject in general the universal operator of all the transformations: it defines the levels and the different functions which the subjects can occupy in a domain which has its rules of formation.

— A progressive politics does not consider that the discourses are the result of mute processes or the expression of a silent conscience; but rather that — science, or literature or religious statements, or political discourses — they form a practice which is articulated upon the other practices.

— A progressive politics, with respect to the scientific discourse, does not find itself in a position of “perpetual demand” or of “sovereign criticism,” but it must know the manner in which the diverse scientific discourses, in their positivity (that is to say, as practices linked to certain conditions, obedient to certain rules, and

susceptible to certain transformations) are part of a system of correlations with other practices.

This is the point where what I have been trying to do for about ten years now encounters the question which you are asking me. I ought to say: that's the point where your question — which is so legitimate and pertinent — reaches the heart of my own undertaking. If I were to reformulate this undertaking — under the pressure of your questioning which has not ceased to occupy me for almost two months — here is, more or less, what I would say: "To determine, in its diverse dimensions, what must have been in Europe, since the seventeenth century, the mode of existence of discourses and particularly of the scientific discourses (their rules of formation, with their conditions, their dependencies, their transformations), in order that the knowledge which is ours today could come to exist, and, in a more precise manner, that knowledge which has taken as its domain this curious object which is man."

I know, almost as much as any other person, how "thankless" such research can be — in the strict sense of the term — how irritating it is to approach the discourses not from the sweet, mute and intimate conscience which is expressed in them, but from an obscure ensemble of anonymous rules. I know how unpleasant it is to bring out the limits and the necessities of a practice, whereas one was in the habit of seeing unfold in a pure transparency the play of genius and liberty. I know how provoking it is to treat as a cluster of transformations this history of discourses which, until now, was animated by the reassuring metamorphoses of life and the intentional continuity of the past. Finally I know how unbearable it is to cut up, analyze, combine, recombine all these texts which have now returned to silence, without the transfigured face of the author being even discernible in it, inasmuch as each person wants to put, thinks he is putting of "himself" in his own discourse, when he undertakes to speak: what! so many words piled up, so many marks made on so much paper and offered to innumerable eyes, such a great zeal to preserve them beyond the gesture which articulates them, such a profound reverence determined to preserve them and inscribe them in the memory of men — all this, so that nothing will remain of this poor hand which has traced them, of this anxiety which sought to appease itself in them, and of this completed life which has nothing left but them for survival? Discourse, in its deepest determination,

would not be a “trace”? And its murmur would not be the place of unsubstantial immortality? Would one have to admit that the time of the discourse is not the time of the conscience carried to the dimensions of history, or the time of present history in the form of conscience? Would I have to suppose that, in my discourse, my survival is not at stake? And that, by speaking, I do not exorcise my death, but that I establish it; or rather, that I abolish all inwardness in this outside which is so unconcerned with my life, and so *neutral*, that it does not distinguish between my life and my death?

I indeed understand all this and people’s uneasiness. They undoubtedly have had enough difficulty in recognizing that their history, their economics, their social practices, the language which they speak, the mythology of their ancestors, even the fables which were told them in their childhood, obey rules which they are not aware of; they hardly wish to be dispossessed, in addition, of this discourse in which they wish to be able to say immediately, directly, what they are thinking, what they believe or imagine; they will prefer to deny that the discourse is a complex and differentiated practice obeying rules and analyzable transformations, rather than be deprived of this tender certainty, so consoling, of being able to change, if not the world, if not life, at least their “meaning” only through the freshness of a word which would come only from themselves and would remain indefinitely so very close to the source. So many things, in their language, have already escaped them; they do not want to lose, in addition, *what they say*, this little fragment of discourse — word or writing, it matters little — whose frail and uncertain existence is to extend their life further in time and space. They cannot bear — and one can understand them somewhat — being told: discourse is not life; its time is not yours; in it you will not reconcile yourself with death; it is quite possible that you have killed God under the weight of all that you have said; but don’t think that you will make, from everything that you say, a man who will live longer than he. In each sentence that you pronounce — and very precisely in this one that you are busy writing at this moment, you have been answering a question so intently, for so many pages, through which you have felt personally concerned and who are going to sign this text with your name — in every sentence there reigns the nameless law, the white indifference: “What does it matter who is speaking; someone has said: what does it matter who is speaking.”