FOUCAULT – PHILOSOPHER OF VIOLENCE?
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I should like to examine how the thinking of Michel Foucault formulated the problem of violence. We should begin by noting that this term “violence” is actually little used by Foucault himself. Foucault is not a philosopher of violence in the sense that he would wish to put forward a general explanation or a fundamental theory of the phenomenon. He neither asks questions concerning the psychological causes of aggression, nor does he seek to inquire into the sociological roots of civil violence. Neither does he consider violence from the victim’s point of view through examining, perhaps, the problems of suffering and denial. Nonetheless, one finds in his thinking a substantial number of considerations on the place of violence in public discourse and institutions; in knowledge and in power.

We may begin by identifying the two domains in which the problem will be developed – the discursive field and the political field. In the discursive field, the question is this: is it possible to speak of a violence of truth and discourse? In the political sphere, the question is: is there a specific institutional and state violence to be discussed? The violence of the *logos*, the violence of the state? These two questions constitute one of the major theoretical legacies of Michel Foucault. This obviously is not to declare that the *logos* is always violent, or that power is inherently violent, but rather that for any moment, particular historical configurations or specific methodological frameworks can be described.
Classical philosophy traditionally places violence in opposition to reason. It is customary to regard them as mutually exclusive, antagonistic, irreducible with, on the side of reason, truth, language, speech, the *logos*, and on the side of violence the clash of wills, coercion, and domination. This opposition is reflected in a number of maxims – reason delivers us from the chains of error and ignorance, the truth is independent of might, knowledge is not power, access to the *logos* is a liberation. Classically, it is considered that the *logos* imparts justice to all things, peacefully rendering them meaningful, that reason frees us from the constraints of obscurantism, that dialogue is an alternative to fighting, that knowledge obviates violence. We can summarize all these issues with the following proposition: the *logos* is essentially non-violent, while violence is fundamentally extra-discursive.

A number of Foucault’s theses make it possible to question this evidence, which we may term classical or Platonic. Before we begin, it is necessary to indicate that Foucault is neither the only nor the first thinker to challenge the idea that the *logos* is always and essentially a peacemaker. The Sophists were presented and denounced by Plato as exploiters of language, making it an instrument of domination and manipulation – an issue of power. Much later, Nietzsche affirmed that there is no pure “will to truth,” because knowledge depends upon a struggle between instincts, and the statement of a truth is never anything but a strategy in an ongoing power struggle. Heidegger strongly condemns the technique, because it assumes what he calls an “enframing” (*Gestell*)1 of the world and nature. Technical reasoning considers the world and humans as manipulable entities from whom maximum utility and profit must be extracted. Finally, we recall Horkheimer and Adorno’s assertion in their 1947 book, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* that “[r]eason has become totalitarian.” In this famous book, the authors raise questions on the extent to which the Nazi concentration camps might not be regarded as a monstrous child of the Enlightenment.

1. “The conventional translation for *Gestell* is ‘enframing’ in English. This translation is misleading, however, since it relates Gestell to a ‘framing’ of human existence, which is a far too neutral term to convey the force with which Gestell impinges upon ontological disclosure. The French translation “*arraisonnement*” is probably closer to the meaning of Heidegger’s concept.” Chihab El Khachab, “Questioning Heidegger on Modern Technology,” 16th Oxford Philosophy Graduate Conference, November 17-18, 2012, full text at http://www.ub.edu/tif/papers/Khachab.pdf - Translator’s note.
Foucault is the heir to all of this tradition of thought, from the sophists to Horkheimer, via Nietzsche and Heidegger. Before examining in detail the theses which, in Foucault, are part of this tradition, we should make two preliminary remarks.

The first concerns the importance of Nietzschean inspiration. It is Nietzsche, rather than the Sophists, Heidegger, or Adorno, who allows Foucault to overcome the great Platonic equivalence of the reasonable logos. For example, Nietzsche claims that interpretation is not the discovery of meaning, but the imposition thereof because there is no “primary signification” of things. This thesis resurfaces in Foucault’s refusal of commentary and hermeneutics. Foucault rejects the idea that the philosopher’s work is to search through texts, speeches, and thoughts for an original meaning buried beneath the thickness of letters and stories. Philosophy is not looking for primary signification, somehow lost – it is a diagnostic activity. That is to say that philosophy is not the revelation of meaning, but the description of a strategy. The philosopher is not a prophet, he is a cartographer. He does not reveal mankind’s eternal destiny from the discovery of a lost original meaning, but describes the historical power struggle, the opportunities and risks that history has presented. Foucault recognizes this Nietzschean influence on many occasions in his work.

The second remark corrects the first a little and helps to reduce the importance of Nietzsche’s influence. There is indeed another important distinction that must constantly be remembered and which lies at the heart of another important text – Husserl’s Krisis. The thesis of a domineering logos can indeed easily lead to irrationality. If reason is inherently totalitarian, salvation must be sought in poetry, mystical intuitions, or impulses of the heart. But most often it is primarily to expose the perversion of reason, rather than reason itself. What is condemned is not reason in itself, but the dominance of calculative rationality, cold and technical, at the expense of critical reason, laden with values. This is important because, when studying Kant’s essay “What is Enlightenment?” Foucault claims to be within the tradition of critical reason. It is reason that denounces unjust rulers and iniquitous systems, it is reason that writes the story of its own perversion, and only reason that can establish an equilibrium in the internal division between formal rigor and ethical rigor.
We can now turn to a first major thesis of Foucault, in which we find an attempt to describe the violence of the Western *logos*. In *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1964), Foucault seeks to establish that the assertion of classical reason presupposes a violent rejection of madness. To be reasonable is to reject insanity. To understand what is provocative in this statement, consider the traditional thesis, which says that reason includes madness, and by understanding it, saves, liberates, recognizes, and integrates it. Madness, according to the traditional theory, is mental illness, but was long treated otherwise and through ignorance, obscurantism, and prejudice, the mad were considered possessed by demons, damnable criminals, the “innocents of God,” or even lazy play-actors. When modern medical reason says that the mad are essentially and primarily patients, it frees sufferers from ancient anathemas, allowing them to access their own truths, reinstating them in the human community. Here we find the Platonic equation. Knowing is to install everything in the pacifying neutrality of its meaning. But Foucault’s thesis is exactly the opposite: it is reason which excludes madness, and when reason claims to define insanity medically, it renews the exclusion. We can give two illustrations of this thesis. The first refers to problems that existed in the creation of “General Hospitals” in France in the seventeenth century. Based on a number of archives, Foucault shows that the underworld of poverty in the mid-seventeenth century was subject to an administrative policy of confinement. The streets of Paris were cleared of their beggars and vagabonds. The insane were evidently part of this “world of the wandering.” Before going further we must immediately prevent a misunderstanding. Foucault does not say that the century of classicism chose exclusively to lock the insane away rather than treat them – of course, a number of the insane at the time were treated medically, and of course, some continued to be regarded as possessed, or as the innocent creatures of God. But these medical or religious practices were traditional and even if they continued to exist, the particularity of the classical experience of madness is expressed more in this new practice of confinement than in other ways. It was not only beggars who were locked up, but prostitutes and helpless old folks too – the indolent and ultimately the unproductive, forming a world of “unreason” which included the insane. This rejection is rooted in a bourgeois moral reasoning that simultaneously condemns laziness, immorality, and insanity. This standard of reasonableness nourishes, according to Foucault, the first
of the *Méditations* and explains why Descartes, in order to push further the possibilities of doubt, preferred to think of himself as a dreamer rather than a madman. Later, the modern experience of madness gave birth to the science of psychiatry. This is the time when, finally, the old interpretations of madness ("the fool is a mystical being" during the Renaissance, "the fool is a pariah" in the classical age) are massively rejected in favor of one view – madness is only and entirely a mental illness. The insane then moved from the General Hospital where they were indistinguishable from the poor, the prostitutes, and the perverts, to the insane asylum. For Foucault, this understanding of madness cannot be immediately interpreted as a rescue and repatriation into the human community. Foucault describes the operation of the first asylums in terms of constraints, beatings, surveillance, and punishment. Scientific objectification, when it comes to the humanities, consists of confining individuals, not only by walls but by truths, imposed on them like a new set of chains.

Other illustrations of this principle of the non-irreducibility of violence and the *logos* can be found in a number of aesthetic, epistemological, and ethical themes developed by Foucault. For example, when Foucault studies literature in Bataille, Artaud, and Blanchot, it is to show that, for the writer, language is not a space that permits him to express his identity and to identify himself within in its truth. Language is a mortifying element, an inhuman, anonymous structure in which the subject undergoes the trials of his dispersion, rupture, and death. On the other hand, the concept of power/knowledge developed in the 1970s allows Foucault to reveal the political dimension of the sciences at the level of their origins and effects. At their origin, he shows that the matrices of knowledge consist of sociopolitical techniques: Greek mathematics and judicial mechanisms, empirical science and techniques of Inquisition, humanities and discipline. As for their effects, Foucault takes the example of psychiatry to show that this science is worth less in its content than in the effects of the power that it authorizes against the person who is its object.

But the goal is not to denounce, in a nihilistic and relativistic manner, the fraud of knowledge by revealing its practical roots or political effects. It is, rather, to show than we can never completely separate the domain of disinterested knowledge, establishing the truth of its objects in the purity of a fundamental detachment, from the domain of pure power relations where manipulation and deceit reign. Knowledge and power are
two sides of the same reality. Finally, “truth” means less the agreement of meanings than the vectorization of forces. A last example, then: in the 1980s, the study of the Greek notion of *parrhesia* brought Foucault, in one of his last lectures at the Collège de France (*Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres* [Governing oneself and others], 1983), to rethink the conditions of the exercise of political speech, particularly in the context of Athenian democracy. Foucault gives the example of Pericles and Demosthenes, when they violently challenge their fellow citizens in the Assembly. He describes this as a genuinely democratic use of speech. But this is to show that democratic frank speaking is less about consensus, to pacify disputes, than to smash the comfortable cowardice of anonymity and the silent majorities. Speaking the truth forces us to recognize that we are less in agreement with ourselves and others than we would like to admit.

The problem now arises concerning the theme of violence through Foucault’s conception of power. On this point we must be very careful, because a number of Foucault’s statements specifically oppose the idea that all power is violence. This refusal to equate power with violence has several aspects. It is firstly a very general opposition to the ideas of Althusser whose thinking aims to understand power as a mechanism of domination by the propertied classes of the lower orders. This domination, says Althusser, is exercised by means of violence and ideology, through the apparatus of state such as the police and education. Power fundamentally suppresses and lies in order to safeguard the economic interests of the ruling class. For Foucault, these arguments are too simplistic. First, because power involves much broader relationships than those between the state and its citizens, and because power cannot be reduced to a mere tool, working for the benefit of economic interests.

Despite these reservations, even if Foucault refuses to say that power is the state, and the state is violence, we can show how his analysis poses the problem of political violence through the concepts of “civil war” and the “reason of state.” According to a classical definition, the state is understood as a sovereign decision-making body, structured by rules of law and requiring the obedience of individuals within its jurisdiction. A political society can be generally defined as a state of harmony achieved by the rule of law over every member of the society. Power, in this sense, is the opposite of violence, since the assertion of a judicial order is the exit, once established, from the pre-political state of war, defined as pure violence.
This is what Foucault repeatedly called the Hobbes hypothesis: power is determined as established law, and law is peace. All the studies conducted by Foucault in the 1970s were just so many ways to censure the evidence of this relentless opposition between political authority and violence, between the rule of law and a state of war. This denunciation is articulated through concepts that express figures of violence: ongoing disciplinary coercion, perpetual civil war, the permanent state of emergency, state racism, etc. We may speak of these issues as a Foucauldian neo-Marxism.

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (1978), Foucault opposes, very broadly, two main modalities of power: the power of sovereignty and disciplinary power. With Foucault we encounter two ways of presenting the contrast between the power of the law and the power of the standard. Either he opposes the violence of authoritarian rule to the gentleness of normalizing discipline, or he distinguishes between two regimes of violence: on the one hand a dramatic, discontinuous, brutal regime (the law that subjugates and dominates), and on the other, a continuous regime that is insidious and insistent (the social norm which eventually obtains docility). The power of sovereignty is that of the authoritarian father, the despotic overlord, or absolute monarch. It imposes its law, relieves subjects of their possessions, collects taxes, requisitions wealth, imposes work, and tortures the body. Disciplinary authority is that of institutions (the army, the school, the factory) which train the body, correct attitudes, and normalize behavior through monitoring, punishment, and examinations.

The neo-Marxism of Foucault is the statement of two theses, corollaries to the construction of this opposition between the law and the standard. On the one hand, it is about the individual disciplined by technical standards, of whom the philosophy of the social contract gives an idealized, ideological version – the “free citizen.” But this equality and freedom of the citizen are proclaimed only to make the hierarchies and constraints of a specific disciplinary system acceptable. Of course, the state is non-violent as such, since it guarantees the existence of fundamental rights and the pacification of interpersonal relationships. But this warranty is only there to make the micro-violence of discipline acceptable. The other neo-Marxist thesis aims to establish an economic function of disciplinary mechanisms: Marx shows in *Das Kapital* how the labor of the worker becomes a productive force from which a profit can be extracted. Foucault
shows how disciplines transform the life force of the worker, immanent and polymorphic, into a force of work which may be used by industry.

Foucault’s neo-Marxism can also be seen through another theme, that of perpetual civil war. The first thesis proposed that the peace of the state hides the micro-violence of disciplinary institutions. At the Collège de France, one year after the publication of *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault began a series of lessons (*Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France* in 1976 [2003 in English], *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France* in 1978 [2007 in English]) which would propose a reading of politics in terms of war and governmentality.

The state, according to the classical theory, is law and law is peace. For Foucault this theme of a non-violent sovereign state is built at the intersection of historical content on the one hand and philosophical discourse on the other. The historical content is the slow emergence in the West (Foucault’s examples are mainly French) of a centralized monarchy reactivating Roman law – as reworked in the Justinian Code, and therefore in its imperial form – because it seeks to establish the legitimacy of its command over the people based on public law. Philosophical discourse is the idea developed by philosophers of the contract (Hobbes, for example) that state law is formed from the transfer by all individuals, once and for all, of their natural rights to a third party which then imposes a positive law whose observance becomes the condition of security for all. At the crossroads of this content and this discourse is an obvious fact – political power always requires the imposition of civil peace by a higher authority.

With this in mind Foucault examines two major sets of narratives: those of English jurists of the seventeenth century (Coke and Selden), contemporaries of the first English Revolution, and those of the eighteenth century French aristocrats (Boulainvilliers, Buat-Nançay). The English historians describe the monarchical institutions of their time as the legal expression and technical instrument of domination by the invaders. The Normans had imposed their law upon the indigenous Saxon peoples whose freedoms were thus violated such that the history of England, from the eleventh century, is fundamentally scarred by a secret war between the victors and the vanquished. In this story, the English Revolution is the time of reversal. The important thing is that in this story, public law appears as a legal system imposed by a warrior caste upon a people after invasion, in order to maintain its dominance. The apparent social order,
secured by a system of public law, is therefore subject to this secret war in which the defeated seek to regain their lost rights. Elsewhere, Foucault studies the early eighteenth century writings of Boulainvilliers concerning the history of France. The pattern this time is more complex. The texts of Boulainvilliers express the efforts of the French nobility to assert their prerogatives against an absolute monarch intent on building a unified France through the progressive destruction of the freedoms of aristocrats, relying on a third-party State to ensure the administration of public affairs. Boulainvilliers’ history lesson is first to remind the king that the nobles are, like him, from a line of Germanic conquerors — they are fundamentally the king’s peers — but also to denounce the strategic alliance the King has made with the subject populations, against the nobility. Foucault’s interest in these texts lies in the fact that Boulainvilliers is not concerned, like other English historians, to rehabilitate a primitive law (that of the Saxon people) following the unfortunate accidents of history (the Norman invasion). Rather, it is to proclaim the legitimacy of a law of force (that of the warriors who came from Germany to subjugate the Gallic people), and to pose the problem of the conditions of its reactivation: how to make it such that the strongest ensure their place and their rights? Which institutions must be set up? What legal knowledge should they acquire? What stories shall they tell and what place should they occupy in society? The interest of these texts by historians for Foucault is that they denounce the illusion of the public peace, the illusion of the universality of law, the illusion of social order. The political game is not one of peace, but of war. Public law is a strategy of domination. These games of domination and these struggles are the engine of history. This is a reversal of Clausewitz’s aphorism: war is the continuation of politics by other means. The idea of a perpetual civil war would be found in the communist doctrine of class struggle. It allowed Lenin to build the idea of a European or global civil war. Beyond national solidarity, it aims precisely to build a transnational alliance of the world’s proletariat to fight against a bourgeoisie whose interests are also global. For Foucault, the state is not understood as something which puts an end to this primitive war. The public peace is nothing more than a strategic moment in the history of continuous civil war, which includes tactical retreats and promises of revolution.

The state can also be violent. It may trigger a “biological” war against its own people. We previously introduced the distinction between sovereign
power and disciplinary power. This opposition, however, overflows far beyond the state framework. Foucault specifically places the state of sovereign function and the state in its biopolitical function in opposition (I prefer to speak in terms of functions, even if Foucault tends sometimes to talk about two forms of state in historical succession). The difference between these two state functions can be found in the following statement: the sovereign state “causes people to die and provides for their life” while the biopolitical state “causes people to live and provides for their death.” When the sovereign state interests itself in the lives of its subjects, it is only ever under the sign of destruction: to condemn to death or to send to die in war. Otherwise, it permits life to continue within the framework of a public and legal order which it is merely content to provide. The emergence of the biopolitical occurs, for Foucault, at the moment when the state considers that the life of its people is its concern, for example, when it implements active health or birth policies. The state, in this new role, seems to demonstrate its ability to care rather than to exercise violence. Yet Foucault shows that the biopolitical function of the state (“to provide for life”) was at the origin of the mass violence in the twentieth century – its genocide, extermination, and massacres. It was in the name of an intensification of the life of its people that the Nazi government distinguished a number of “races.” The destruction of European Jewry by the Nazis can be understood in Foucault as a paradoxical inflection of the biopolitical project: the biopolitical state, in order to protect and improve the lives of its people, exterminates races whose presence it considers detrimental to the purity and vital intensity of its people.

I should mention one final way in which Foucault reveals the violence of the state. It is found in his 1978 course at the Collège de France entitled Security, Territory, Population. It is customary to say that between 1976 and 1978 Foucault abandoned the model of war for that of governmentality. However this change, as far as our problem is concerned, does not constitute a break but an inflection. In 1976 it was enough to say that the state did indeed establish peace, but a precarious, fragile, and illusory peace, the peace of the “winners of the day.” Yet the losers had not capitulated. By 1978, it had become necessary to understand something else: how what Foucault calls the governmentality of the reason of state introduced a logic of violence as a principle of its action. We must first understand the relevance of the concept of governmentality. Foucault
invented the concept of governmentality in order to understand the state as a historically determined construction. There was a governmentality of the city in ancient Greece, a governmentality of the Empire in ancient Rome and the Christian Middle Ages, and a governmentality of the state in the modern age. But the concept of governmentality goes well beyond the political frame. Foucault speaks of a pastoral governmentality which assumes a purely individual relationship. Governmentality is the art of leading men and things. In the seventeenth century, a governmentality “of the reason of state” appeared, that is to say, in which the leaders directed their actions toward a specific rationality. One may rule on the basis of a natural, a divine, or a family model, governing as a good father, as a just king, or respecting the natural rights of individuals or natural hierarchies. The seventeenth century invented government according to the state, that is, a government committed to the sustenance of the state, based on needs related to the assertion of the state, which calculates interests in terms of the interests of the state, without moral, religious, or legal consideration. Governing according to the state is to assert a regime of necessities indifferent to morality, religion, and law. The “reason of state” and the “coup d'état” are the concepts which establish this primacy. The state can be defined as a certain political unit (consisting of a territory, a centralized administration, a population, and natural resources) whose existence is supported by some governmentality. The undefined reinforcement of the state is obtained by a governmentality which coldly calculates interest. Foucault’s idea is not to find the philosophical foundations of “how the state should govern,” but to describe how historically we started to rule ourselves from the seventeenth century onwards with the systematic adoption of this specific need called the state. Governing according to the state is a perpetual pendulum swinging between compliance with a legal order which is guaranteed and, in order to strengthen the state, the taking of measures and decisions in contempt of all law. The ultimate justification is the interest of the state. Therefore, Foucault argues that violence is to be found at the heart of the state since it exists according to a regime of necessity whose assertion presupposes the transgression of moral values, the law, and natural requirements. To certain decisions (when a son puts his own mother in prison, when a Catholic king makes an alliance with Protestant princes against Catholic Spain, when a king bloodily represses an unarmed people), we can say
“this is immoral,” “this is contrary to religion,” or “this is not natural.” Perhaps, but it is in the interest of the state. I quote Foucault in the lesson of March 15, 1978: “The violence of the state is nothing other than the irruptive manifestation, in a way, of its own reason.”

In conclusion, we should remember that the work of Foucault is neither an anthropological nor a psychological, sociological, or moral treatment of violence. It never aims to bring violence back to any primary determinant whatsoever (as a fundamental negativity, a natural aggression, domination or social frustration – an original finitude). Foucault also refuses any comparison between power and violence, because for him power is a relational game. Violence is precisely that moment when, in a particular power game, the asymmetry becomes too great and there is no longer any possibility of reciprocity.

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