

Legitimate Strangeness: Remembering Michel Foucault

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for Lucian

Tuesday 25 June, 2024. Early morning, a sunny, hot day in London. On my way to work, I think of Michel Foucault, who died 40 years ago on this day at the age of 58 from AIDS-related complications. I think of the many ways in which this *maître-penseur* helped shape my own ideas. Of heady days on campus in the late 1970s, inspired by his hands-on activism alongside Genet and Sartre. I think of his masterly *Madness and Civilization*, exploding and expanding the naïve and scholastic Marxism of my youth. Then in the early 2000s, stumbling upon his published lectures at the *Collège de France* on 'Care of the Self' added much needed depth to the crushing platitudes I had been subjected to during the course of my therapy training.

In late July 1978, Foucault had a near-death experience. Hit by a cab while crossing rue de Vaugirard in Paris, he was thrown into the air. He landed on the car's bonnet, splinters of glass in his head and face. He thought he would die, and was overcome by a pleasurable sense of acceptance. Five years later, he told a Canadian interviewer:

Once I was struck by a car in the street. I was walking. And for maybe two seconds I had the impression that I was dying and it was really a very, very intense pleasure. The weather was wonderful. It was seven o'clock during the summer. The sun was descending. The sky was very wonderful and blue and so on. It was, it still is now, one of my best memories [laughter].

Anti-Philosopher

Like Walter Benjamin before him, Foucault didn't like to be called a philosopher. Too narrow a term for the depth and breadth of his exhaustive, impassionate enquiry which drew from, and expanded on, psychology, history, existential phenomenology, sociology, ancient Greek thought, Zen Buddhism, medicine, psychiatry, traditional philosophy, and more. And yet he was a true philosopher in Nietzsche's sense: one who can unsettle us; one who does not

reinforce the conformity and dull-wittedness of the status quo. As an activist, he then employed his impressive array of inter-disciplinary knowledge in support of marginalized communities who, then as now, are at the receiving end of the hatreds and prejudices of bourgeois society.

In the late 1940s, Foucault attended Merleau-Ponty's lectures at the *École Normale Supérieure*, and like some of his fellow travellers (Sartre, de Beauvoir, Derrida, Levinas, Deleuze, Guattari, Kristeva, Lacan, Cixous, Irigaray, Althusser), found himself at the heart of that extraordinary flourishing of thought rarely seen in human history, comparable in grandeur and imaginative power to the flowering of philosophy in Ancient Greece. In the British Isles, that extraordinary burst of innovative thought is superciliously called 'continental philosophy' (as opposed to what? 'insular' philosophy?).

The joys of self-policing

Both in *Madness and Civilization* (1961) and *Birth of the Clinic* (1963), Foucault expressed the still-relevant view on one of the constitutive aspects of modern society. Unlike forced segregation on a mass scale (the 'Great Confinement' of the Classical Age), power is no longer exercised solely through overt violence but via agencies of control and the diffuse presence of the 'medical gaze'. By the 1970s, his position will shift somewhat, even though concerns about modes of surveillance and control will remain central.

Following a hunger strike among detainees, in the early 1970s Foucault helped set up GIP (Group for Information on Prisons), an experience which informed his 1975 book *Discipline and Punish*, a history of the rise of the prison system as we know it. In that book, with his distinctive genius for the striking image, Foucault condensed the historical shift from coercive dominance to more cunning modes of control through the image of the Panopticon ("all-seeing-eye"), the structural device proposed by Jeremy Bentham at the end of the eighteenth century. As many readers will know, this was a device consisting of a central high watch-tower within a circle of prison cells. From the tower, a guard can see every cell and inmate, but they can't see into the tower. Prisoners don't know whether or not they are being observed. As a result, they begin to police their own behaviour out of fear. The Panopticon illustrates effectively how power is exercised in modern society. No physical violence is needed, Foucault commented, but a clever use of geometry and architecture. Modern forms of social administration – centralized, pervasive, bureaucratized – exert coercion on ordinary citizens

much more effectively than blatant violence. As a result, the modern citizen becomes duly disciplined, atomized and self-policing. Every decade construes its own form of self-policing aligned with contemporary forms of cultural pressure. *McMindfulness* is a good example of self-policing on a wide scale. Apportioning the blame entirely on the atomized individual for failures that are structural and social, *McMindfulness* is duly sanitized and decontextualized of its existential and spiritual links to the Dharma (where mindfulness, or *sati* in the language of the Buddha, is apprehended instead as mindfulness-of-impermanence, i.e., awareness of the transient nature of existence). Neoliberal psychotherapy is another example of an efficient system of self-policing, including the brand of conventional existential therapy in the UK. Both methodologies cheerfully lend us a hand in policing ourselves so we can go back to our reserved seat in the traffic jam, our bullshit jobs, our narcotized existence, our euphoric security where no transformation can ever happen.

“What I am trying to do – Foucault said in an interview of the early seventies – is grasp the implicit systems which determine our most familiar behaviour without our knowing it. I am trying to find their origin, to show their formation, the constraint they impose upon us. I am therefore trying to place myself at a distance from them and to show how one could escape”. Despite their avowed championing of ‘diversity’, modern societies carry out punishment within a system of surveillance and correction which centres on the foibles of the particular case and on the psychology of the person. This is because *intention*, instead of transgression, is now the main principle of culpability. While in feudal societies power was exercised randomly, in the modern world it circulates through highly-developed channels, invading individuals’ bodies, gestures, and all their daily activities. Foucault realized this long before algorithms, social media, and smartphones became ubiquitous in our lives.

Then came, as Sohrab Ahmari writes, Foucault’s lecture of March 14, 1979, essential in understanding the first part of the 21st century, a time in history dominated by biotechnology and the return of eugenics, a time when every person is understood as ‘human capital’, an ‘entrepreneur’ of themselves, an era when human relations, including marriage are seen as economic investments geared towards the co-production of future human capital. Prophetic? You bet. But also paving the way for the work of political thinkers such as Wendy Brown who argue for reiterating the primacy of politics over economics against the neoliberal ideology of market domination.

Cultivate your legitimate strangeness

How does one respond to this sorry state of affairs? By cultivating *care of self*. In Foucault's hands, care of self, inspired by the *epimeleia heautou* of ancient Greek thought, whose meaning is *exercise of bodymind*, is as far removed from current anodyne notions of 'self-care' as one can imagine. Less about bubble baths and more about *acting* in the world. It is an existential stance that goes beyond the ideology of trauma repair and the politics of injury. It is, in Foucault's own words, "the formation of the self through techniques of living, not of repression through prohibition and law", and as such, intimately linked to the task of embracing our finitude as a necessary stepping stone to contributing to social and political life.

As a heterodox historian, Foucault was interested in the things history does not register: the seemingly marginal, what gets lost in the folds of mainstream events. For instance, the interaction between the young girl or boy discovering masturbation and their Victorian governess who forbids it. Those who hold power and knowledge – be they educators, judges, priests, doctors, psychotherapists – are bound to classify people according to moralizing guidelines which always champion normativity. Inspired by one of his teachers, Georges Canguilhem, author of the seminal book *The Normal and the Pathological*, Foucault launched a scathing indictment of the complex machinery of social control, deconstructing the false claims of what constitutes normality and abnormality, unmasking the attendant punishment and persecution of those who belong to racial minorities, who cultivate different sexual practices, who are disabled or 'mad', of just about anyone who doesn't fit with the *normotic majority*.

René Char, a poet whose work Foucault knew and loved, wrote:

*Companions in pathos, who barely murmur,
Go with your lamp spent and return the jewels.
A new mystery sings in your bones.
Cultivate your legitimate strangeness.*

The strangeness in question is precisely the focus of the thoroughly documented histories that Foucault explored in his unique way and gifted to the world. Strangeness is not necessarily marginal. It could be said, especially if one is attached to the notion of 'Being', than strangeness is ontological, that it is the very fabric of existence. In his *Existence and Existents*, Levinas writes: "Its strangeness is, we might say, due to its very reality, to the very

fact that there is existence. The questioning of Being is an experience of Being in its strangeness”

With relations to ethics (and by implication to psychotherapy), it is far more crucial for Foucault to explore and understand the relationship we have with ourselves than to blindly obey moral rules. For instance, one may want to practice sexual abstinence not as a result of prohibitions but as a personal choice, as a way to cultivate what he calls an “aesthetics of existence”. Rethinking ethics means rethinking the subject – how we think of the self, which is where therapy comes in. What Foucault tells us – via the Greeks, via Nietzsche – is that there is no such thing as a true self. Instead, the self must be created. One way of understanding this in relation to therapy is to think of the true self by imagining our lives freed from the clutches of the super-ego’s harsh and dull propaganda. Not easy, considering how deeply implicated we are in the construction of power. Not only does power constitute the subject, Foucault is saying; we play an active role too in its creation. We can also rebel, however, and shape ourselves creatively, explore new ways of being, finding new pleasures, new experiences, new modes of living and thinking.

Surprisingly for a French thinker and activist normally associated with poststructuralism, the starting point for refashioning the self comes from Buddhism, and in particular the notion of *śūnyatā*, a term normally translated as ‘emptiness’. In the Dharma, and specifically Zen, Foucault found a credible alternative to the trappings of both Christianity and Western Humanism. The point he makes following his visit to Japan are also helpful for the contemporary spiritual practitioner caught in a wild-goose-chase for ‘enlightenment’. What matters to Foucault is that Zen practice *attenuates* the individual, making space for greater fluidity and fostering one’s ability to think and act in new ways outside the usual loops of mental habits. Viewed in this way, Zen practice can be seen as a political act, as immanent reflection on the role of relations of power in the making of our subjectivity, and as a stepping stone towards creating new ways of being and being with others. A long way from the Christian notion of *metanoia* or conversion with its attendant guilt and *mea culpas*. It is also strangely similar, in my view, to Montaigne’s motivation for self-reflection: less a way of beating oneself up and more a process of exploration born out of curiosity.

Manu and guest facilitators will run AFFECT THERAPY, a year-long affordable training course of ten monthly weekends in person (Hampstead, North London) and online from March 2025 to February 2026, equivalent to 120 CPD hrs. For details see www.manubazzano.com