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## Deep hanging out with Michel Foucault

Iver B. Neumann

Chapter 37, pp. 427-434 in Richard Ned Lebow, Peer Schouten and Hidemi Suganami (eds) *The Return of the Theorists: Dialogues with Great Thinkers in International Relations* London: Palgrave, 2016.

**Abstract:** In his energetic afterlife form, Michel Foucault (1926-1984) discusses his relationship to other luminaries of this pocket sphere for leading intellectuals and highlights how his work on the state, governmentality and discourse analysis all grew out of the broad French tradition in social science.

*IBN has won a ticket in the lottery to visit the so-called Afterglow, a pocket of the non-corporeal afterlife realm where leading intellectuals hang out, and has decided to spend it on an interview with what was once Michel Foucault.*

IBN: You once told another reviewer that the happiest moment in your life came when you were run over by a car and thought you would die.<sup>1</sup> Well, here you are. Happy now?

MF: No. My head is still working at full speed, and I don't even have sex to divert me.<sup>2</sup> I have become more cerebral than ever, and believe me, it's boring.

IBN: Congratulations on your English, though. During your years at Berkeley, students complained.<sup>3</sup> I suppose you get no more of that?

MF: I get lots of practice around here. Some of the recent arrivals here are Americans, and they are, of course, monolinguals. Even Heidegger, with whom I have spent quite some time in conversation, has reneged on his view that philosophising can only be done in Greek and German, and is putting his nose to the grindstone. Not that he really gets any other system than his own for that. You could do with some accent-polishing yourself, by the way.

IBN: Indeed. I'm particularly ashamed of that since my own language [Norwegian, IBN] and English were mutually understandable as recently as a millennium ago. So except for the boredom, what is it like being, ah, I suppose 'dead' is the word, although it sounds a bit too final, perhaps 'respawned'?

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<sup>1</sup> David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, 'An Ethics of Pleasure', *Foucault Live* (Interviews 1966-84), edited by Sylvestre Lotringer (New York: Semiotext ([1982] 1989), 257-277.

<sup>3</sup> When I [IBN] translated Michel Foucault, 'Omnes et Singulatim: Toward a Critique of Political Reason', *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954—1984*, edited by James D. Faubion, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1980] 2000), 298-325 into Norwegian, I checked the provenience of the text to find out whether the translation should be done from the English or French original. A librarian at Berkeley could confirm that the written original was in French but that the original performance of it was in English so broken that it was hard to follow.

MF: I try to fight the loss of my corporeal existence by focusing on the good stuff, like the unbeatable conversations. Pity that Plato isn't here, though, I would really have liked to discuss his ideas on the state with him. With the re-investment I did in ancient Greek to pursue the first volume of my history of sexuality, I even think the exchange could have been rooted in his own concepts, although I certainly do hope his English would have been better than my Greek.<sup>4</sup> You may recall that I embraced his general understanding of the state as I believe he formulated it in *The Statesman*, politics as the weaving together of the strands of life as a privileged social concern.<sup>5</sup> Such a conception spawns a key problem, which is what the relationship between the one and the many should be, and it's around that problematique you will find most if not all of my interventions.<sup>6</sup> There is a line, I think, from all that to Durkheim's understanding of the state as a merging of the separate cadre that is the early state with subjects, what eventually becomes society. These are at least the dominating intertexts in my own work on the state, and it would be nice to have that exchange. However, Durkheim is not so easy to talk to on this. He is a classic authoritarian, and thinks I have misunderstood capitally by focusing on the costs of the merger between state and society. Where I see surveillance, control and debilitating norms, he keeps on insisting on all the good that comes out of an ever-present socially minded state, like some latter-day social democrat. He is right in spotting that his own work on the state was important for me and that I stood much of his thinking there on its head, but he refuses to discuss the Christian genealogy that I suggest, with the welfare state being not only the result of the good citizen but also of the idea that human lamb must have a pastor. Clausewitz is much easier, he engages my inversion of his idea of politics as an extension of war by other means head on. Durkheim is just too fond of his politico-religious project of sacralising a human drive towards a world state. Quite stubborn, too, even the existence of his very own propaganda books against Germany during the First World War cannot make him see that the world state he wanted was a France writ large and that all that is gone now. Well. He is still a forefather, and an important one. Durkheim, Mauss, Lévi-Strauss and I still play whist every Friday. It's all in the intellectual family, really.

IBN: But you hardly refer to them in your written work?

MF: Of course not, only an ignoramus would not spot the influence. The no-reference is, after all, a French tradition of long standing, didn't you know?

IBN: Let's return to Plato, I would have thought that his description in *The Republic* of the perfect state of things, with boys taken from their parents and trained by what we translate as the state in the most detailed way would be an example of discipline?

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Uses of Pleasure. The History of Sexuality, vol. 2*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1984] 1985).

<sup>5</sup>Foucault, 'Omnes et Singulatim'.

<sup>6</sup> 'At the basis of Foucault's concerns, one always finds the question of the dissolution of order, even if this remained unspecified as a topic'. Arpád Szakolczai, *Max Weber and Michel Foucault: Parallel Life-Works* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 232.

MF: The vision is there, and since this was a model that captures his thinking and so a certain contemporary discourse, I could have opened my book on discipline with that, really, instead of giving the example of a 19th century English public school. Well, that's all in another lifetime. As to Plato, he simply decamped. Sublimed, as we call it here. Went on to yet another plane of existence. I bet it is ideal, at least for him (sniggers). Plotinus insists that he is still in contact, but that I can only take note of. Dante was absolutely beside himself when it was clear that Plato had decamped. Here they both were, in a place that is not unlike the place that Dante described, and while Dante was quite pleased about that, he was also disappointed that there seemed to be no heaven for him to go to. Took him the better part of half a millennium to get over it, really, and just as he was about to make it, Plato goes and leaves for what Dante now believes is, after all, heaven. Bad luck.

IBN: What do you make of your reception?

MF: Let me say at once that I only have arrivals down here to go on. From what I hear, there has been a lot of 'what did he mean' debates. That was to be expected, but it is bad news nonetheless. I went out of my way to spell out how I was truer to the project in hand and to the quest for what I call truth – truth as understood by me -- than to consistency, that I was always making a point of trying out new possibilities, and of course that makes for inconsistencies, that was part of the point. *Ni Dieu, ni maître*. I said it again and again, take what you can use for your own project and get on with it, look at the local sequences, beware of the trans-historical. But no. The other issue is simply a thorn in my side by comparison. Bourdieu just joined us. Speaking to him, I understand that he has taken a lot of my stuff, rationalised it, and applied it to what he thinks of as strategic action. That's all right, I suppose, but the way he seems to bend over backwards to hide where he got most of it from strikes me as silly. The boy from Bearn always going on about not really fitting in, but always ready to rip off the very people he is fighting. Typical resentment. The only consolation is that I'm not doing all that now.

IBN: Well, it seems to fit what you just referred to the French no-reference tradition quite well. But what aren't you doing any more, power/knowledge?

MF: No.

IBN: Then what?

MF: Feyerabend always wanted to be a cabaret singer, and singing is something we can do down here. We're doing scat, mostly. No, no (laughs heartily), I think you misunderstand me, I mean singing in harmony. Jazz stuff.

IBN: No more scholarship?

MF: You don't pay attention. I still stick to the adage of acting locally. The power relations between energetic beings are really not that complicated. Why, with my favourite carnal focus missing, there's little for me to study. I've turned to aesthetics full time.

IBN: I hope you do not mind that I return to the issue of power/knowledge, though. Your earlier studies of discipline have, as you know, become part of the basic tool kit of social history and theory. I see little reason to go over this mode of power, since life in total institutions and your theorisation of it are so well...

MF: I must, if you allow, arrest you. If what I have heard is true, I have been misunderstood regarding a basic point. I made remarks to the effect that life had become like life in prison. I even said that the point of being critical was not being ruled so much, to break out of a prison of our own making. In French, we like to speak in metaphors. The Americans are more literally-minded. Some people, especially criminologists, have felt it necessary to privilege their own field of study by assuming that our lives ARE prison lives. Now, that's rather different from saying that they are LIKE prison lives. It is a fundamental misreading, for if life had been prison life, then discipline would have been the dominant mode of power everywhere -- everywhere in the physical world, that is. There would have been little point for me to do all that work on governmentality, for example.

IBN: Well, as long as you use that penal vocabulary, I suppose misunderstanding is inevitable, but let's talk about governmentality. As far as I understand what was going on in 1970s, your work on the ins and outs of governing from afar was actually a response to critics?

MF: A rare case of critics actually helping me with my thinking, yes, for it made me add a third mode of power to the two that I had worked with before, which were sovereignty – the always present mode of power where we are gaming and the result is not given beforehand – and discipline, where that game is heavily rigged by the total institution that orchestrates it.<sup>7</sup> The critique was really quite simple minded: why do you ignore subjects when you do your analyses of discipline? Of course I had to, the whole point was that there was no big brother behind it all, no subject, only totalitarian thinking that conjured up the practices, only institutions like the asylum, the prison, the boarding school. Again, I went out of my way to avoid that misunderstanding. I started my book on epistemes with a dictionary that was never written, my book on madness with a ship that never sailed and my book on prison with a penal system that was never built, and what did the historians say? But that Chinese dictionary did not exist! There was no such thing as a ship of fools! Bentham's panopticon was not realised for almost two centuries! 'No shit, Sherlock', as Dewey said to me the other day, I wanted to tease out the power of ways of thinking, and the historians did not get it, not even the third time around. Even Peter Burke, whose work I enjoyed,

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<sup>7</sup> 'The S&M game is very interesting because it is a strategic relation, but it is always fluid. Of course, there are roles, but everyone knows very well that those roles can be reversed'; Foucault quoted in James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 263.

made that mistake. Wrote a retort based on the arcane idea that I really thought the ship of fools had existed, ha! ha! And still, the critique carried a deeper truth, for I was never good on individuals. Individuation, yes. Individuals, no. In my books on Herculine Barbin and Pierre Rivière, it is true, I am more interested in using them as examples of how gender and crime is constituted than in them as persons.<sup>8</sup> Personae, not persons, that was the limitation. My work on governmentality did not really make amends for that, for my interest remained in individuation, but at least I was able to get at a much wider set of individuating practices by introducing the idea of conduct of conduct.

IBN: Your reception in my corner of academia has first and foremost focussed on governmentality, but there is also a general interest amongst postcolonialists. They are also dissatisfied with the missing individuals.

MF: That was bound to happen. Already when Edward [Said, IBN] published *Orientalism*, he included that passage on how, in the case of Western academic representations of the Orient, the writings of a few individuals had been important.<sup>9</sup> I have no quarrel with that. Dumézil always talked about monuments, of how certain texts are key to understanding discourse, and that's true enough.<sup>10</sup> You know, I hear that discourse analysis has taken off, but I hatched the idea only *post festum*. Once I had a break in Tunisia and started to think through what I had really done in *Les Mots et Les Choses* [English translation *The Order of Things*, IBN] I concluded that the idea of an age's episteme was really too muscular, too totalising, too much like Lévi-Strauss' idea that there are latent structures underlying entire societies.<sup>11</sup> I wanted something more specific that could capture not the utterances, but the specific social setting that could make utterances possible, and the answer was discourse.<sup>12</sup> The *Archaeology [of Knowledge]*, IBN] was really all an attempt to come to grips with

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<sup>8</sup> 'Nietzsche was saying how little a man is responsible for his nature, especially in terms of what he considered to be his morality. Morality has been constitutive of the individual's being. The individual is contingent, formed by the weight of moral tradition, not really autonomous'. Foucault quoted in James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1993), on p. 283.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1977).

<sup>10</sup> Georges Dumézil (1898-1986) was a leading proto-Indo-Europeanist and mentor of Foucault's, instrumental, among other things, in securing for him a job at Uppsala University and a chair at the Collège de France [IBN].

<sup>11</sup> 'Both Foucault and the structuralisms are not interested in whether the phenomena they study have the serious sense supposed by participants. Thus they reject the view, shared by pragmatists such as Dewey, hermeneutic phenomenologists such as Heidegger, and ordinary language philosophers such as Wittgenstein, that in order to study linguistic practices one must take into account the background of shared practices which make them intelligible'. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Brighton: Harvester, 1983), p. 57.

<sup>12</sup> 'The status of practices was at the heart of the famous exchange between Foucault and Derrida that started with Derrida's lecture on Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* (reprinted in Derrida 1967) and ended with Foucault retorting to his former student that in his work, "discursive traces are reduced to textual traces [...] the original is allocated to what is said and not-said in the text, so as not to put discursive practices back into the field of transformations in which they were carried out". Quoted in Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, transl. Betzy Wing (London: Faber & Faber, [1989]1992), p. 121.

what, with hindsight, was to become my version of a general break with structuralism. Individuals were not the focus here, utterances was, I was out to capture what made it possible to say something, as opposed to what was said, and how that gave rise to a doxa that constrained the one in his dealings with the many. So Edward's critique was fair enough, for he was out to capture a very specific contribution made by very specific people. I was not. I am glad you raise the question of methodology, though, for that was one of my many bêtes noires. The hunt went on, episteme, discourse, assemblage, *dispositif*, but it was all an attempt at getting to the specificity of social constellations.

IBN: To press the postcolonial issue, you certainly made an attempt at taking that hunt beyond Europe, most famously, perhaps, by seeing hope in the Iranian revolution?

MF: I must admit that I was flattered when *Corriere della Sera* wanted me there as a correspondent, but I went also exactly because I had focussed so much on the Western tradition that I thought I owed it to another tradition to go. And I was curious, not least because there were many Iranian intellectuals exiled in Paris. What I saw there was excitement, the feeling that something new was being created, it was not unlike the bathhouses in San Francisco in that regard, new community on unknown ground. It all went wrong, but then again, human history is rife with false beginnings. From what I hear, though, globalisation has really taken off and you all have to relate to other traditions on a regular basis now. A very important change. When I was in Tunis, the memory of colonialism was still so fresh that local energies had not really been released there and in Paris, except for Fanon and some of the students, like Mudimbe, there was not really all that much happening. The rights that have been established in our own tradition have counterparts elsewhere, and we have to open up to that.<sup>13</sup> So, I was a bit too excited there to begin with. Although it is an error on a par with my short flirt with communism, I have no regrets. If critique is the art of not being governed so much, it must include an element of speaking truth to power, and that truth has to come from experience; reading experiences, lived experiences. Sometimes, the truths will be off. There is a sense in which the process is more important than the result. It is, I think, a calculated risk of the parrhesiastic calling to fail sometimes.<sup>14</sup>

IBN: I see from the hourglass sign on my lottery ticket that my time is almost up, so, since you dwell on your mistakes, might I ask you to round this out by mentioning what you think are your greatest successes?

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<sup>13</sup> Foucault defended the right of the Baader-Meinhof-related French lawyer Klaus Croissant to travel freely across Europe, while also falling out with Deleuze and Guattari's stance on the issue, which Foucault felt condoned terrorism. Michel Foucault, 'Va-t-on extraditer Klaus Croissant?', *Dits et écrits 1954-1988*, vol. III 1976-1979 (Paris: Gallimard, [1977] 1994), 361-365; David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1993), p. 393.

<sup>14</sup> Foucault is referring to his final work here, which concerned the emergence of the practice of speaking truth to power (Gr. *parhessia*), see his lectures at the Collège de France 1982-83 and 1983-84.

MF: Ah. From what I hear, outside of history, the basic genealogical approach of asking why exactly something becomes a problem within this or that social constellation seems to have caught on. That insight was Nietzsche's, but I take great pleasure in having lent a hand there, for if you ask question in that way, you are already on your way towards doing something critical. And then there is the other end, the effects of it all, the importance of asking not only why people do what they do and if they know what they do, but also if they know what that which they do, does. Very few people do. But that is all methodology. If you meant in terms of substance, I think that knack for looking at seemingly historical stuff in order to criticize the present panned out particularly well when it came to globalisation, and also for biopolitics. It is rather nice to look back and see that the questions about the governing of health and life that I asked thirty years ago are now being asked as if for the first time.