

The Return of the Subject in Michel Foucault : A Relativist Sociology ?

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The theme of relativism in social sciences, aside from some rare exceptions (Paul Veyne or Claude Lévi-Strauss), has so far been tackled, mainly in the Anglo-American area, in the modes typical of that cultural and scientific tradition, that is essentially with the instruments of analytical philosophy. Little research on that argument has been devoted to "continental" social sciences in spite of the plentiful material available. Therefore, in order to contribute to such work, I would propose to start from two supplementary premises:

- (i) normative systems, networks of social action and structural constraints are not invariant;
- (ii) the history of ideas comes into being when the idea of truth is historicized, that is when epistemology fractionates the reference of knowledge to totalizing and transcontextual frames of explanation-comprehension.

My first hypothesis is that a confirmation of those premises is to be found in Michel Foucault's work. Indeed, though he belongs to the structuralist movement, the French philosopher objects to any conception that be elaborated and set forth in terms of structured models of the dynamics of human history that would work transhistorically and assign a Telos to history.

According to Habermas (1985, Chap IX), however, the genealogy of the *coups de force* (the historical succession of "conceptual takeovers") on which social sciences are based leads Foucault to a radical criticism of all rational activity. And Habermas argues that if Foucault's position was entirely right the cognitive moment would be useless. In reality, it seems to me that Foucault's concern is not a devastating criticism of thought as such but the study of the historical genesis of the social categories of knowledge. His is an attempt to rediscover a form of sociohistorical relativism while Habermas searches for a stable foundation to his communicational ethics. Foucault condemns the fixist conception of the human subject as set forth by the humanistic or liberal tradition. His intention — it is my second hypothesis — would rather be to put forward the conception of the social subject as the result of a contingent and systemic construction.

With the publication of *Histoire de la sexualité* (1976-1984), Foucault — whose work had that far been mainly concerned with questions of epistemology and

politics — tackles the problem of ethics. The field of coercion (prison, penalty, torture, etc.) gives way to the subject's relative freedom within codified social spaces. We witness not only the emergence of actor's subjectivity but also the reappearance of subjectivity in Foucault himself, who starts using the first person singular "I" again, thus putting himself on stage as an intellectual party to knowledge.

Even though Foucault has been considered as the theoretician and critic of the relation between knowledge and power, as the theoretician and critic of social control and normalization, the sociological dimension of his analysis nevertheless aimed at bringing out the evolution of the relation between, on the one hand, the forms and the exercise of power and, on the other, the conditions in which the relations from subject to object, which constitute knowledge, develop and modify. *Surveiller et punir* (1975) put the question of the social subject from the point of view of power and subjection; it was a history of the subject centered on objectification procedures. *Histoire de la sexualité* (1976-1984) reverses the perspective: here Foucault analyzes the way the individual shapes up as a social subject within a problematic field in which it is more or less free in relation to codes and prohibitions which evolve historically and differentiate socially. That "relativist" reconstruction of the subject then occurs according to subjectification procedures typical of ethics and sociology. Foucault's work thus fits into a history of thought that attempts to answer the following question: "how does knowledge socially shape up? how can thought, as a proposition of truth, have a history that makes that truth relative and not universal?" Thought appears as a social process and has as such a history, goes through evolutions and variations: what is true to me today will be thought and problematized differently elsewhere, in another age and by other subjects.

At the beginning of *Usage des plaisirs* (1984), Foucault distinguishes three main constituent lines in research on sexuality. My third hypothesis is that those main lines can be extended to the global content of Foucault's work in an attempt to redraw the features of the theoretical scene. From Foucault's point of view, the point is to study (i) the formation processes of knowledge, (ii) the normative systems (power, constraints) that condition and regulate their practices, and (iii) the forms in which individuals can and must recognize themselves as social subjects. To synthesize the third hypothesis, the following question can be asked: how does Foucault proceed to delimit, within the changing space of the practices that make up social life, the mechanism and the temporary devices by which the individual views itself as a subject and by which society conceives itself as the actor of history? Therefore, I propose that it be necessary to go beyond impossible alternatives such as: society or individual? interiority or exteriority? reality or representation? history or fiction?

There exist nowadays no universal value in whose name the social identity of each individual can be defined or the truth of the moment and of always can be stated. Each social group, each place, each situation develops its own values. Foucault teaches in conclusion — and this will be my fourth hypothesis — that the value of the fragmentary values onto which subjects sometimes project themselves and in which, at other times, they recognize themselves or then associate or repel each other,... constitutes the essential stake of conflicts not only symbolic but also social, political, scientific, ethic, etc. with a view to controlling, interpreting, producing, applying those very values. Which leads us back to the two starting premises : there is no reference to totalization principles any more, and even Reason splits up in the face of the countless facets of a complex and polyhedral social reality. Surprisingly Foucault, who has often been associated to the idea of French structuralism, might contribute to bringing a certain relativism back on the agenda with a project of going beyond both hypostases of structure and the utilitarianism of monadic individual (Taylor, 1989, 109).

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