Conversation With Michel Foucault

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The legendary Michel Foucault—philosopher, historian, and a leading proponent of new ideas—came to Stanford University last October to speak of his new work: identity and individuality as a political question.

Head of the Department of the History of Systems of Thought at the Collège de France in Paris, Foucault was invited to Stanford to deliver the Tanner lectures. Admired, even lionized, in France, he has been alternately praised and criticized in this country, particularly in academic circles. He has been adored for the scope and originality of his thought, but he has been criticized for being contradictory, for a “lurking sentimentality” in his overzealous defense of criminals.

In his various workbooks that include Madness and Civilization, Birth of the Clinic, Discipline and Punish, and The History of Sexuality, Foucault has examined how in concepts and institutions we have been “trapped in our own history.” His ambitious intent has been to “unite all those knots which historians have patiently tied,” to examine the technology of power: “the reach of the very grain of the individual, touches his body, intrudes into his gestures, his attitudes, his discourse, his apprenticeship to daily life.”

In his Tanner lectures, “Each and Everyone: A Criticism of Political Rationality,” Foucault sought to examine the origin of the power of the modern state over individuals. The pastoral shade of power, he claimed, originated with the metaphor of God as a shepherd in ancient Egyptian texts and in the Old Testament. Jehovah was regarded as a shepherd leading his flock, keeping watch over the behavior of each individual while guaranteeing the safety of the flock. According to Foucault, the political tradition’s “shepherd” is linked with the Greek political idea of the citizen—the rational individual sacrificing his life for the state, if need be—to produce the theme upon which the modern state is based. “Our modern society compares the city—citizen game and the shepherd—flock game,” he remarked.

Throughout his week at Stanford, Foucault could be seen at various places on campus, gesturing, speaking with great intensity in a heavily accented English, striving for clarity in a language not his own. There is something deceptive and continuously surprising in his appearance. In repose, his face is serious, almost frowning, but in conversation, it is transformed. He smiles often and his face becomes alive with the effort to convey his ideas.

He is an intensely private man. The French Who’s Who lists only a few personal facts about him: that he was born in 1926 in Poitiers (Vienne), graduated from the University of Paris 1, and Pau Medical College, and of Anna Malapert. Only once in the course of the following interview did he speak personally: “I’m not a boy,” he said, “I never thought of becoming a writer.” But then, as if it were an interjection that had no special meaning—or no meaning distinct from the intellectual point he was making—he went on to elaborate his idea.

But whatever the meaning of private or public to Foucault, it is clear that he is a man of great intellectual passion, even fervor. He is not an artist, he says, nor is he a social scientist. He is someone who illuminates ideas with subjectivity. In his conversation, “personal” and “immaterial” become transformed into each other.

Dillon: In France your work is very well known, part of the cultural life. Here you are known only in academic circles—the fate, it seems, of almost all intellectual critics in the United States. How do you account for this difference?

Foucault: Since 1964 in France the university has been in a deep crisis, both political and cultural. There have been two movements: a movement among the students to try to get rid of the academic game, a movement also identified with other movements such as feminism and gay rights. The second movement has been heavily criticized by the university. There has been an attempt among them to try to express their ideas in other places—to write books, to speak on radio or television. And then, French newspapers have always been much more interested in discussing ideas of this kind than American newspapers.

Dillon: In your lectures you spoke of the necessity for individual self-realization. In the U.S. there has been for some time, of course, a large movement for self-realization, an apolitical one, connected with encounter groups or groups like EST or groups of other kinds. Do you make a distinction between “self-realization” and your use of the word?

Foucault: In France too there is a movement of the same type and of the same intensity. I think of subjectivity in another way. I think that subjectivity and identity and individuality have been a great political problem since the ’60s. I think there is a danger in thinking of identity and subjectivity as quite deep and quite natural and not determined by political and social forces. The psychological subjectivity that the psychoanalysts deal with—we have to be liberated from this kind of subjectivity. We are prisoners of certain conceptions of ourselves and our behavior. We have to liberate our own subjectivity, our own relation to ourselves.

Dillon: You said something in your talk about the tyranny of the modern state as it relates to war and welfare.

Foucault: Yes, if we think about the way in which the modern state began to worry about individuals—about the lives of individuals—there is a paradox in this history. At the same moment the state began to practice its greatest slaughters, it began to worry about the physical and mental health of each individual. The first great book on public health in France was written in 1784, five years before the Revolution, and ten years before the Napoleonic wars. This game between death and life is one of the main paradoxes of the modern state.

Dillon: Is the situation different in other societies, in socialist or Communist countries?

Foucault: It is not very different in the Soviet Union and China from this point of view. The control over individual life in the Soviet Union is very strong. Apparently nothing in the life of the individual is a matter of indifference to the government. The Soviets killed 16 million people to build socialism. Mass slaughter and individual control are two deep characteristics of all modern societies.

Dillon: There are critics in this country who are also concerned with the questions of the manipulation of individuals by the state and by other institutions. I think of Thomas Szasz, for example. How do you think of your work in relation to theirs?

Foucault: This kind of problem I write about is not a new problem. It is not my own invention. One thing struck me in the American review of my books, particularly the review of my book on prison. They say I am trying to do what you are doing, but I am not being critical of your work. I am criticizing your work in the sense that I think the type of work you do is linked with the control in the Soviet Union or China. It is not my intention to worry about the ways in which people think of their own life, but I do not think of your work in a different way. It is not a question of punishment or any other word, but the question of the ways in which people think of their own life, their behavior, their work, their prison. My problem is to show and analyze the way in which a set of power techniques is related to forms, political forms like states, or social forms. Goffman’s problem is the institution itself. My problem is the rationalization of the management of the individual. My own work is not a history of institutions or a history of ideas, but the history of rationality as it works in institutions and in the behavior of people.

All human behavior is scheduled and programmed through rationality. There is a logic in institutions and in behavior and in political relations. Even in the most violent ones there is a rationality. What is most dangerous in violence is its rationality. Of course violence is something terrible. But the deepest root of violence and its permanence come out of the form of the rationality we use. The idea has been that if we live in the world of reason, we can get rid of violence. This is quite wrong. Between violence and rationality there is no incompatibility. My problem is not to put reason on trial, but to know what is this rationality so compatible with violence. It is not reason in general that I am fighting. I could not fight reason.

Dillon: You say you are not a scientist. Some people say you are an artist. But then I was present when a student came up to you with a copy of Discipline And Punish and asked you to sign it, and you said, “No, only artists should sign their work. And I am not an artist.”

Foucault: An artist? When I was a boy I never thought of becoming a writer. Now when a book is a piece of art, that is something important. Somebody like me, it is always to do something, to change even a small part of the reality—to write a book about madness, to change even the smallest part of our reality—people’s ideas—

I am not an artist, I am not a scientist. I am somebody who tries to worry about the behavior through those things which are always—often—far from reality.

Dillon: I understand that you have worked and taught in Sweden, Poland, Germany, and Tunisia. Did working in these countries have an important influence on you?

The Three Review
in prison disciplinary proceedings. But the primary legal question is whether the TDC prison courts have the authority to do anything to alleviate the cruel and unusual punishments.

TDC is a medieval torture chamber. Prisoners are not slowly dismembered or drawn and quartered. It is not the best prison system in the country. I disagree. Again, contrary to what its administrators are fond of asserting, but it is far from the worst in many respects. It is relatively clean, and it may be the only prison system that supplies prisoners with a shower and clean change of clothing every day. It is more secure than the system in which inmates out of their cells for work a good many hours.

TDC is, however, probably the most repressive prison system in the country. Most if not all other prison systems treat the majority of their inmates as the "minimum" security risks, but TDC runs only "maximum security" institutions. Under maximum security conditions, prisoners are totally segregated, their privacy and personal autonomy reduced to the absolute minimum. TDC's refusal to follow prevailing practice is especially anomalous given that Texas sends an exceptionally high proportion of convicted felons to prison, which means that TDC probably has a less dangerous population than most other systems. Even TDC Director Estelle believes that one-third of the inmate population could be released tomorrow with no ill effects on Texas' crime rate, and many would argue that his estimate is conservative. Nonetheless, TDC refuses to afford any substantial number of inmates the privacy and relative freedom possible in minimum and medium security prisons.

In addition, more TDC inmates are sentenced to mandatory confinement for "disrespectful attitude" than for any other rule violation, and TDC considers "disrespectful attitude" one of the more serious of infractions. "Bad-eyeing" an officer is disrespectful. Officers' directions are orders, and asking "Why?" is disrespectful. Muttering in Spanish while complying with an order is disrespectful. Talking back, getting argumentative, or listening to "talk to a lawyer about this," however quietly, is of course disrespectful.

All prisoners are by nature repressive, and it is difficult if not impossible to make a legal argument that repression of inmates, however extreme, is cruel and unusual. The fact of TDC's extreme repressiveness is far from the center of our legal argument in Rical. But that repressiveness, and the philosophy and attitudes that have spawned it, may be closer to the center of what is really wrong with Texas prisons than the scathing thing about TDC is that so many of