

“THE SNI WAS ASKING FOR THE ROSTER...”:
FOUCAULT IN BELÉM IN NOVEMBER 1976

Anyone who reads the “Chronologie” in Michel Foucault’s *Dits et écrits* will see that he visited Belém in the state of Pará in northern Brazil on two occasions: May 1973 and November 1976. He went there for the first time as a tourist right after the delivery of “Truth and Juridical Forms” at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro at the end of May 1973. He had visited Belo Horizonte and other cities in Minas Gerais before arriving in the Amazon, first in Manaus and then in Belém. The second time he went back to back to Belém was to fulfill a promise he had made to Benedito Nunes, Chair of Philosophy at the Federal University of Pará (UFPA), in 1973. In 1976, he organized his trip to Brazil, under the coordination of Alliance Française of Brazil, and asked that Belém be included in his tour. On November 6, 7, and 8 of that year, he spoke in French to a select audience in the auditorium of the then Center of Arts and Languages at UFPA. Nunes was the moderator of the discussion. Questions were formulated in Portuguese, and Nunes served as the translator.

On that occasion, as a recently enrolled nineteen-year-old university student, I was the teaching assistant for “Introduction to Philosophy.” My function at Foucault’s lectures was to pass a roster for each attendee to sign his or her name. I never thought that my academic destiny was being sealed on those three nights of listening to Foucault. From his lectures, I

The SNI Was Asking for the Roster

understood only three words: *sexualité*, *vérité*, and *pouvoir*. I had no idea at that time how much these three words would work in my life as “magical” words, and how they would become “concepts” of a “philosophy,” which I have been studying since.

Foucault’s second visit to Belém has a fundamental pre-history to be told, which allows us, first and foremost, to understand why Nunes invited Foucault back to give lectures at our university. Born in Belém on November 21, 1929, Nunes graduated with a Law degree in 1952. He formed part of a generation of writers and poets who were responsible for the consolidation of the modernist movement in Belém. In the 1950s, he started to write for the literary supplements of the major newspapers of southern Brazil in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. He was one of the founders of the Philosophy School of Pará in 1954, teaching the History of Philosophy and Ethics until 1960. Founded in 1957, UFPA hired Nunes in 1961. In 1966, he became a full professor. His fundamental philosophical interests were, from the very outset, focused on Phenomenology. He became an autodidact, mainly of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. His books about Heidegger and his studies in literary criticism of great Brazilian writers, such as Clarice Lispector, made him famous in Brazil and abroad. As a visiting professor and lecturer, Nunes was in Rennes, Porto, Austin, Vanderbilt, Berkeley, Stanford, and Montreal. In 1960, during his first trip to France, he attended the lectures of Merleau-Ponty (at the Collège de France) and Paul Ricouer. In 1992, Nunes retired. On February 27, 2011, he died in Belém.

In a very special and significant way, the paths of Foucault and Nunes had crossed before their first personal meeting in 1973. Besides teaching at the School of Philosophy, Nunes had been involved in theater since the end of the 1950s. Alongside his wife, Maria Sylvia, he founded an amateur theater group called Grupo Teatro Norte, which was responsible for the introduction of “modernism” in the theaters of Belém. They staged not only classics such as *Oedipus the King* and Max Frisch’s *Biedermann and the Arsonists* but also Brazilian masterpieces, such the poem *Morte e Vida Severina* by one of Brazil’s greatest poets, João Cabral de Melo Neto. Nunes was the director of UFPA’s School of Theater between 1962 and the beginning of 1967, which is to say, already in a period of full military dictatorship.

It was in his capacity as the director of the School of Theater that Nunes began to suffer political persecution, which was preventing him from leaving the country because he was not able to obtain a passport, as he recalls in a text from January 3, 1967. On top of that, he was subjected to a military judicial process. Of course, “getting out of the country” at that time was one of the options for Brazilian intellectuals to avoid jail and Nunes started to plan to go to France to pursue his PhD in Paris. In the same text from the beginning of 1967, he referred to the period as if it was under the domain of the “spirit of gravity” from Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. From the section “On Old and New Tablets” in the third part of that book, he notes the following passage: “And we should call every truth false which was not accompanied by at least one laugh.” It was a sad period of the persecution of all who were considered enemies of the regime and, before long, the institu-

The SNI Was Asking for the Roster

tionalization of torture, which produces nothing but false truths.

After long negotiations, Nunes and Sylvia arrived in Paris in October 1967. Nunes sought to write a doctoral thesis about Brazilian modernism at the Sorbonne's Institute of Brazilian and Portuguese Studies, under the direction of Léon Bourdon (1900-1994), a specialist in Portuguese themes who had been the director of the French Institute of Lisbon between 1928 and 1935. In other words, the Nunes couple arrived in Paris in the prelude to May 1968 and a little after other events that shook the intellectual and philosophical scene in France. *The Order of Things* was published in Paris a year and a half before that October of 1967 in April 1966. On August 10, 1966, a newspaper report on the selling of books in the summer of that year from *Le Nouvel Observateur* had as its title "Foucault comme des petits pains," which referred to the unexpected success of the book. The three thousand five hundred copies of the April edition sold out very quickly. In June, five thousand copies were reprinted; in July, three thousand more; in September, three and a half thousand more, according to Didier Eribon's biography of Foucault. The success continued in 1967: four thousand in March and five thousand more in November. We could imagine the scene (it would only be a matter of imagination): Nunes going out to buy bread and returning with a copy of *The Order of Things*! In short, Nunes arrived in Paris not only on the eve of May '68 but also in the midst of the resounding success of Foucault's book and of the structuralist wave.

In 1988, in the foreword of my book *Foucault e a psicanálise*, Nunes referred to the "rare verbal beauty" of *The*

Order of Things! Indeed, it was that beauty that attracted him to the book in the beginning. There were so many reading marks in his personal copy because he had read it with so much intensity. I handled that copy many times in the second semester of 1980 in the library of his home. That was the place where he used to receive his students in the midst of my master's thesis preparation. But the aspect that attracted Nunes more than the beauty of Foucault's style was certainly the fact on each page he recognized another thought from a philosopher that he had already chosen as his greatest philosophical reference: Heidegger. Nunes got back to Brazil in 1969 without concluding his doctoral thesis. But at the time of his stay in Paris he wrote the article "Arqueologia da Arqueologia," where he played Foucault against himself to seek to demonstrate that it was necessary to do an "archaeology" of Foucault's perspective, which would take us, in any case, to Heidegger. That article was published in four parts between October and November 1968 in the literary supplement of *O Estado de São Paulo* newspaper, with which Nunes had been collaborating for some time. The article, which pioneered the Brazilian reception of *The Order of Things*, was soon included in the first edition of *O dorso do tigre*, a collection of Nunes's essays published by the highly regarded São Paulo publisher Perspectiva in 1969.

O Dorso do Tigre bears some traces of the reading of *The Order of Things* in its title and epigraph. The latter return to the words of Foucault at the end of section four of chapter nine: "Ought we not to remind ourselves that we are bound to the back of a tiger?" The interrogation of this question takes us back to the consideration of man in the "analytic of finitude" as "a strange empirico-transcendental doublet." The presence

The SNI Was Asking for the Roster

of Kant in Foucault's book does not escape Nunes, who begins the article by comparing Foucault's undertaking – that of the “‘archaeology’ of the human sciences” – with that of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, which would have been the “‘archaeology’ of the natural sciences.” This is not the occasion to offer a summary of Nunes's argument, which starts from a Foucauldian conception of “positivity” very different from the Kantian meaning; presents itself as contrary to the kind of historiography proper to a history of ideas; and “rests in a secret historical-philosophical sedimentation” that he will “seek to identify.” Now, this secret, which the “archaeology of archaeology” aims to reveal, would eventually bring to light the crucial importance of Heidegger's thought, whose ontology is considered the “main generating matrix of Foucault's archaeology.” Such a reference does not contradict his comparison with Kant in the beginning of the article. Quite the contrary, Nunes refers to the fact that Foucault's Kant in *The Order of Things* was Heidegger's Kant, a relation completely confirmed by subsequent Foucauldian studies.

We can imagine that Nunes's encounter with Foucault in June 1973 made him remember that reading of *The Order of Things*. Indeed, when Foucault's arrival in Belém was confirmed a few months in advance in 1976, Nunes gathered together a small group of professors from the Philosophy Department for a small introductory course on Foucault's philosophy. Though he was already familiar with Foucault's subsequent books, especially *Discipline and Punish*, Nunes devoted his course exclusively to *The Order of Things*. In 1976, ten years after its publication and when Foucault's philosophy had already taken other turns, *The Order of Things* still remained

Foucault's main book to Nunes. In the interview that he gave to Professor Márcio Benchimol de Barros and me in 2004 (but published only in 2008), Nunes reiterated his admiration for this book. When I asked him what Foucault's legacy is for posterity, he replied: "*The Order of Things* and the book about sex." Referring to *The Order of Things*, Nunes highlighted one more time what he had already shown in his 1968 articles: "The fact that he [Foucault] had established a notion of positivity as a mark of each epoch with its regime of thought that is at the same time a language regime is very important. This seems to me to be a very great contribution."

Nunes personally handled Foucault's visit together with the director of Belem's Alliance Française. In a statement to the journalist Adriana Klautau Leite a few years before his death, he joyfully recalled those days of hanging out with Foucault:

We were in a period of military rule when he came to deliver some lectures in Pará at my invitation. Foucault was extraordinary. I moderated and translated the questions of the people. Afterwards, we took Foucault to Maraú Beach, close to Belém. I had land there but I didn't have a house. It was just the land. He loved it. He was a brilliant swimmer. An athlete. He told me that it was the first time that someone had taken him to a beach like that in Brazil. He swam a lot there. Afterwards, we went to a little dive bar. We bathed right there and had lunch.

This anecdote pleased Nunes so much that he had already recounted it a few years before in the same interview with Professor Benchimol and me when we referred to the photo-

The SNI Was Asking for the Roster

graphs of him with Foucault at Maraú Beach on Mosqueiro Island near Belém. “Ah,” Nunes told us, “there are pictures, it’s true. Foucault at Maraú. A tremendous swimmer, he dove into the waves. He was athletic. We went to a dive bar. At the time I did not even have a house in Maraú. We bathed there and then had lunch at a little bar next to the beach.”

However, Foucault’s arrival in Brazil in 1976, one year after he had interrupted his course at University of São Paulo to demonstrate his solidarity with the students of that institution who were on strike against the military dictatorship, represented a challenge for him. As Roberto Machado recalls for us in his new book *Impressões de Michel Foucault*, an order for the arrest of Foucault had been issued right after his participation in the student strike and his attendance at an ecumenical mass at São Paulo’s Cathedral the week after the journalist Vladimir Herzog had been found dead in a well-known prison in the city, where political prisoners were interrogated, tortured, and sometimes killed. The order was withdrawn for fear of the negative national and international repercussions that it would occasion.

Without even knowing about all of those details, Nunes was well aware of the undercover agents at our university, students who were actually police officers from state security agencies. I think that he organized a roster for Foucault’s talk to avoid the “informants.” In the same way, he arranged with Foucault to have the lectures delivered without any translation. Only the discussion would be translated. All of these measures were taken, and the fact that they were carried out in the strictest terms is due to the prestige of Nunes. There was not any interference in the organization of the lectures, which were

entirely his responsibility. Basically, he wanted to “shield” Foucault, as we say today in Brazil. He wanted to protect him to the greatest possible extent from any political problem. He was well aware of the radical character of Foucault’s thought.

Seated in the back of the small auditorium, I followed the lectures of that already renowned philosopher without great interest after having asked those present to sign their names on the roster. My knowledge of French did not allow me to understand much of what he said. But I still have a very strong memory of his appearance: he was seated on top of a table with his legs crossed in the manner of “zen” masters all in white with his long sleeve shirt and turtleneck that we recognize so easily these days, since he appears with this same shirt in many photographs. I remember his paused voice, sometimes strident and assuming an enthusiastic tone. When the television crew entered the room to film him for a few moments on one of the nights, he stopped speaking and struck various poses in front of the camera while laughing. On the last night, my colleague, who was a teaching assistant like me, asked me to solicit Foucault’s autograph for her own personal copy of the Portuguese edition of *The Order of Things*. At the exit to the auditorium, I gave Foucault the book, in which he wrote: “Amicalement, Michel Foucault” (Best wishes, Michel Foucault).

Everything seemed fine but two events changed the course of things. On the last night, Foucault was offered dinner at the most upscale restaurant in town. My friend, the same one who had asked me for Foucault’s autograph, was responsible for recording the lectures. She did it on her personal recorder and left it, along with the tapes, inside her car next to the restau-

The SNI Was Asking for the Roster

rant. A thief stole the recorder and the tapes, thinking, undoubtedly, that the latter contained music. In this way, the recording of Foucault's lectures at my university was lost forever. Furthermore, on the day after Foucault's interviews, the fears that Nunes did not reveal became a reality: the dreaded National Information Service (SNI) asked the university for the roster of those present at the lectures, the same roster that I was responsible for distributing among the attendees. Nunes categorically refused to give it. He knew what it would mean for the lives of the persons who he himself had invited if the roster ended up in the hands of the SNI. Once I asked him for the roster. He told me that he had destroyed it.

As Freud said, the trauma is always "a posteriori." I thought of the theft of the tape recordings of Foucault's lectures in Belém as a shadow only years later, when I started to write my MA thesis on Foucault and psychoanalysis after I had discovered another Foucault (so different from the one of *The Order of Things*) through the Brazilian publication of *Microfísica do poder* in 1979. When I went on my first trip to Europe in 1988, I received a small package containing the tapes of the lectures of "Truth and Juridical Forms" from the hands of Machado. In Paris, I had to deliver them to the hands of the editors of *Dits et écrits*, who were then in the process of collecting Foucault's interviews and courses from around the world. In the low-lit streets around Gare du Nord, in the direction of the home of the person where I had to deliver the precious package, I walked rapidly and tensely. It was December. It was very cold. The shop windows were decorated for Christmas and I squeezed the package close to me. It could not be stolen. I confess that it was a great relief when I saw those lectures pub-

lished in *Dits et écrits* in 1994. Only at that moment did I feel that my mission was accomplished.

Foucault had spoken very generously about Belém. In the “Chronologie” of *Dits et écrits* we can read that “il garda une forte nostalgie” (he retained a strong nostalgia) of Belém. In his book, Machado refers to the pleasure that the visit to Belém gave Foucault in 1976. When I met Daniel Defert in Paris on May Day 2015, he told me the same thing, and one of the most exciting moments of our conversation was when I showed him the photos of Foucault in Belém.

I personally met Nunes for the last time in December 2010, two and a half months before his death. We participated in an event about photography at a cultural institute in Belém. Our personal relations through more than thirty years were made easy by the fact that we lived next to each other. On that night I picked him up and left him by car at his home. On the way back right after his talk, which I moderated, I told him enthusiastically that I was beginning to write a new book about Foucault on Cynicism on the basis of the course *The Courage of Truth*. “It will be a lovely book,” he said to me, “and I want to read it.” “You, sir, will write the preface,” I responded. We were almost at the door of his house. And so the last words I had with him were, perhaps by no coincidence, about Foucault. Unfortunately, he cannot read my 2013 book *Michel Foucault e a verdade cínica*, which I dedicated to his memory.

The SNI Was Asking for the Roster

NOTES

- 1 Bruno Pereira Dutra translated this article with the assistance of Marcelo Hoffman. I dedicate it to Daniel Defert and Maria Sylvia Nunes.
- 2 Daniel Defert, “Chronologie,” in *Dits et écrits 1954-1988*, Vol. 1, 1954-1975, by Michel Foucault, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald with the assistance of Jacques Lagrange (Paris: Quarto/Gallimard, 2001), 59, 68.
- 3 Lilia Silvestre Chaves, ed., *O amigo Bené: Fazedor de rumos* (Belém: Secult, 2011), 41-42.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 42.
- 5 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 192-193.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 210.
- 7 Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, rev. ed. (Paris: Champs Biographie, 2011), 266.
- 8 Benedito Nunes, foreword to *Foucault e a psicanálise*, by Ernani Chaves (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Forense-Universitária, 1988), xi.
- 9 Benedito Nunes, “Arqueologia da arqueologia I,” *O Estado de São Paulo*, October 5, 1968, Suplemento Literário; Nunes, “Arqueologia da arqueologia - II,” *O Estado de São Paulo*, October 19, 1968, Suplemento Literário; Nunes “A arqueologia da arqueologia - III,” *O Estado de São Paulo*, October 26, 1968, Suplemento Literário; Nunes, “A arqueologia da arqueologia,” *O Estado de São Paulo*, November 2, 1968, Suplemento Literário.
- 10 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 322.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 318.
- 12 Benedito Nunes, “Arqueologia da Arqueologia,” in *O dorso do tigre* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1976), 59.

- 13 Benedito Nunes, “Entrevista com Benedito Nunes,” Interview by Márcio Benchimol de Barros and Ernani Chaves, *Trans/Form/Ação* 31, no. 1 (2008): 22.
- 14 Ibid., brackets added.
- 15 Adriana Klautau Leite, “Benedito Nunes, o iluminista dos trópicos,” *Brasileiros*, August 2009, 102-107.
- 16 Nunes, “Entrevista com Benedito Nunes,” 22.
- 17 Roberto Machado, *Impressões de Michel Foucault* (São Paulo: n-1 Edições, 2017), 111-112.
- 18 Nunes, “Entrevista com Benedito Nunes,” 22.
- 19 Defert, “Chronologie,” 59.
- 20 Machado, *Impressões de Michel Foucault*, 229-230.