

José Castilho Marques Neto

IN THE TAXI WITH MICHEL FOUCAULT:
MEMORIES OF A TWENTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD
PHILOSOPHY STUDENT

Translated by Marcelo Hoffman

In those first years in the 1970s of democratic reconstruction after the bloody decimation of all resistance to the arbitrary judgment and brutality of the civil-military dictatorship, we who recommenced the resistance against oppression did not know how to think or act in the singular.¹ The plural and the collective inspired us and guided our actions, despite differences between the few and courageous groups that reconstructed the student movement at the University of São Paulo (USP).

To write a first-person account about an unforgettable encounter with Michel Foucault in 1975, as *Cult* requests, is a difficult task.² But it is clear from the uncomfortable memory of a period in which many of us were a part of a youth mowed down by the omnipresence of arbitrary judgment and the usurpation of the most fundamental rights.

The truth is that we were really frightened and we drew from fear a force of solidarity that made us excited about each classmate who joined us to become a companion of struggle and resistance, an invisible unity that expressed an increasingly plural desire for freedom. We wanted more than to survive, we wanted to live fully.

*In the Taxi with Michel Foucault:
Memories of a Twenty-Two-Year-Old Philosophy Student*

In this spirit and with this desire, I started my degree in philosophy at USP in 1972. Socializing between students occurred at a slow pace. The restrained conversations deepened according to the rhythm of confidence that we gradually established between ourselves. Students in the graduate program reached out. They sought to influence us on national issues and the necessity of rebuilding the student movement. To engage or to separate by trying to stay away from the timid movements of re-creation of representative spaces, such as Academic Centers?³ These were the first almost philosophical questions that I had to confront.

It was a time of censorship of news and political opinion in newspapers and, at the same time, of cultural explosion and transgressions of the imposed order. Banned humanities books were purchased in other languages at the Raul Castell newsstand in the USP “Barracos” or in some bookstores in the old center, such as *Duas Cidades*, *Brasiliense*, and *Avanço*.⁴ The book covers were packaged in brown paper in case of a “raid” in the streets of São Paulo. At the same time, new titles appeared in the press: *Brasil Mulher*, *Lampião*, *Em Tempo*, *Movimento*, *Nós mulheres*, *Versus*, *Bondinho*, *ex*, and *Jornal da República*. These so-called “tinies” were against censorship and the dictatorship, and they aligned with counter-culture, opposition arguments, and the rights of women and homosexuals.

Times of fear but times of opposition. I made the decision to join my classmates who reconstructed the Philosophy Academic Center (CAF), which we named “João Cruz Costa” after the unforgettable retired USP professor who hosted us a few times in his house to tell us stories about the school and cheer us up with his philosophical erudition.

There were few of us but we were almost Siamese twins. Out of everyone, Vânia and I, and later Jorge, were the most inseparable. At the CAF, we made bulletin boards, promoted debating groups, and set up roundtables with university professors and others who were forcibly retired, such as José Arthur Gianotti. Philosophy was the first USP department to declare a free Academic Center. We did not have a hierarchical board but a group of leaders that coordinated activities.

Decree 477 and the fight against paid education gained the greatest weight on the agenda of struggles for student autonomy on March 17, 1973, when security forces assassinated our classmate Alexandre Vannucchi Leme.⁵ The mass at the Sé Cathedral in his memory led by Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns attracted three thousand five hundred persons who confronted an enormous repressive apparatus in the area. Walking through the aisle of military police to enter the Sé that early evening was one of the most frightening experiences I've ever been through. But the air of active solidarity and revolt that we received upon entering the cathedral filled our lungs with the desire and strength to continue resisting.

The student movement progressed from that moment in struggles for democratic liberties. In 1974, the Defense Committee of Political Prisoners was established and, in 1975, the famous "School of Communications and Arts strike" left USP with the first student rally since Institutional Act Number 5.⁶

It was in this context of repression, fear, and active resistance that I got to know Michel Foucault in 1975, not as a student or researcher of his work, but as a young militant and philosopher student fighting the military dictatorship.

*In the Taxi with Michel Foucault:
Memories of a Twenty-Two-Year-Old Philosophy Student*

Against the boldness of student demonstrations in 1975, the dictatorship reacted by carrying out various arrests of students, and it did the same thing with civil resistance to the coup, arresting journalists, professors, and union members, some of whom were members of clandestine parties of the left.

In September and October, these arrests intensified and, precisely in this period, Michel Foucault, who had just published one of his most important works, *Discipline and Punish*, was teaching a highly popular course in the USP Psychology Department, in the same “Barracos” where we studied.

The first time I saw him I was responding to a call for help from organizers, who looked for me and Vânia to convince our classmate Luiz Gonzaga, who suffered from emotional disturbances, to withdraw from the front of the table where Foucault was lecturing. With a bottle of cachaça in his hand and already drunk, Luiz yelled “Nonsense” and “Lies” to the horror of the educated audience. The climate was almost hostile toward him and among the few stares of sympathy and acceptance of that explicit contravention of order was Foucault’s. We spoke delicately to our friend and guided him to his home at the time, the CAF. But what stuck with me was the non-judgmental look of our illustrious speaker.

Repression intensified, the climate was tense, and fear ran high. On October 22, Professor Marilena Chauí contacted us and informed us that Foucault was open to demonstrating against the state repression we were suffering, and that he wanted to know what we would suggest as the student movement. I remember that we suddenly demanded that he renounce his classes, denounce the military dictatorship abroad,

and express his solidarity with the imprisoned. On the following day, the 23rd, we would have a university assembly against the imprisonments at the large Caramelo room of the School of Architecture and Urban Studies (FAU) at USP. We invited Foucault, who promptly accepted the invitation. He asked only for a conversation before the event.

It was up to me to have the conversation and around 8 a.m. on October 23, 1975, the eve of the imprisonment of Vladimir Herzog and two days before his assassination, there I was at the age of twenty-two on a bench in Praça Roosevelt awaiting the famous philosopher and his colleague (and our professor) Gerard Lebrun.

I remember that I prepared for this meeting with all of the apprehension of the world, not because I was going to meet an internationally renowned philosopher, but because the matter was too important and strategic for our democratic struggle. It's incredible how youth and the strength of the time of combat against arbitrary judgment can make us, really a lot of young persons, averse to being dazzled.

Once again, the attitude of a true master asserted itself before the notoriety of a star philosopher. He had an objective, inquisitive, respectful, and attentive dialogue with a young student who listened to him and understood him in French but needed a translator (Lebrun) to make himself understood. It was not a dialogue of intellectuals, one between peers. But a respect between citizens asserted itself and we had a long conversation about what we were constructing in the student movement, in the focus of our struggles, in the situation of political prisoners, and in the daily horror of studying and

*In the Taxi with Michel Foucault:
Memories of a Twenty-Two-Year-Old Philosophy Student*

working under the bloody dictatorship. He heard, argued, and questioned. In the end, he told me: “Let’s go. I’m ready. We can go. I’ll make a declaration there renouncing my classes and I’ll denounce what is happening in Brazil abroad.”

We took the first taxi that passed, a Volkswagen Beetle with only a backseat. I sat in the middle with Lebrun and Foucault at my sides and, at that moment, I felt “the token drop,” as we used to say at the time.⁷ I went up Consolação with one of the most polemical and innovative thinkers of that period and I sensed his proximity to us, to our struggle, to our identity. Like so many professors who were with us back in those days, Michel Foucault was also one of us.

Upon arriving at FAU he created an expected stir at the assembly, which was already taking place. I took him backstage, where some classmates were already waiting for us. He asked for paper, sat down at the table, and rapidly wrote a short text of two paragraphs. Glauco translated it to Portuguese, some classmates revised it, and I had to read the version for the assembly next to Foucault, who read the text in French. Emotional applauses and a genuine excitement greeted the strong words of the philosopher who refused to continue giving classes in a country that arrested and tortured intellectuals and workers.

His manifesto anticipates what would become a reality in the years to come, namely the approximation of the student movement with the new unionism that already announced itself in 1975 in the ABC:⁸ “In the defense of rights, in the struggle against torture and the infamy of the police, the struggles of intellectual workers unite with those of manual workers.”

After the reading we shook hands energetically with emotion in our eyes. I never saw him again. I only accompanied him from afar in readings and in the innumerable polemics of his life. But the combative twenty-two-year-old boy still in training received another type of lesson from Foucault that certainly helped him demarcate his own intellectual trajectory as a professor and citizen. Difficult but enormously instructive times!

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

- 1 This article was first published as “No táxi com Michel Foucault: Memórias de um estudante de filosofia aos 22 anos” in the July 2017 issue of *Cult*. It is translated here with permission from the author.
- 2 *Cult* is a Brazilian magazine published on a monthly basis.
- 3 Academic Centers are spaces of student representation. For an overview of them, see Victoria Langland, *Speaking of Flowers: Student Movements and the Making and Remembering of 1968 in Military Brazil* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 27.
- 4 *Barracos* translates as “shacks” or “shanties.” It is a reference to an area consisting of buildings that temporarily housed the School of Philosophy, Literature, and Human Sciences (FFLCH) at the time of its forced move from Rua Maria Antônia to the Butantã campus.
- 5 Decree 477 was a law issued in February 1969. It banned a wide range of political activities at universities and imposed harsh punishments on violators. For a more detailed description of the law, see Langland, *Speaking of Flowers*, 175-176.
- 6 Institutional Act Number 5 was a decree issued in December 1968. It expanded the powers of the dictatorship and inaugurated a period of intensive political repression.
- 7 To feel “the token drop” (*cair a ficha*) means to suddenly realize something.

*In the Taxi with Michel Foucault:
Memories of a Twenty-Two-Year-Old Philosophy Student*

- 8 The ABC is an industrial region of São Paulo consisting of the cities of Santo André, São Bernardo do Campo, and São Caetano do Sul.