

FOUCAULT AND THE ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY OF POLITICS

In this short paper, I would like to make some remarks on a specific *attitude* that characterizes Foucault's analysis of power—or better, of power relations and practices of resistance. Right at the beginning of the manuscript of the first lecture of Foucault's still unpublished 1971-1972 course at the Collège de France, *Théories et institutions pénales*, Foucault writes: “No introduction, what is the *raison d'être* of this course?” Answer: “*Il suffit d'ouvrir les yeux*,” “You just have to open your eyes.”¹ A striking claim, one that I would like to connect to the beautiful text of a conference Foucault gave in Japan in 1978, *La philosophie analytique de la politique* (*The Analytic Philosophy of Politics*),² in order to show a possible convergence between Foucault's analysis of power and ordinary language philosophy.

As Arnold Davidson has convincingly shown, Anglo-American philosophy has always been for Foucault an important source of inspiration.³ As early as 1967, Foucault said that the Anglo-Americans allowed him to see how “to treat statements in their functioning,”⁴ thus contributing to the shaping of his famous definition of discourse as a “strategic field,” as a set of “strategic games,” as a struggle, a weapon, a force.⁵ Much less attention has been given to ordinary language philosophy as a possible source of inspiration for Foucault's analyses of power in the 70s. But in these analyses, Foucault precisely

tries to rethink and redefine a set of concepts which are at the core of traditional political philosophy, and in particular the concepts of power and resistance, showing that our *ordinary* experience of them does not correspond *at all* to the available philosophical, juridical or political theories of power and resistance—of what power and resistance consist in. In fact, as Foucault writes in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, the juridico-political representation of power, even if “it is by no means adequate to describe the manner in which power was and is exercised,” is still today “the code according to which power presents itself and prescribes that we conceive of it.”⁶ And this is strategically crucial, because “power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself:” its success “is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms” and secrecy “is indispensable to its operation.”⁷

Thus, the question is: how can we *unmask* power in its concrete functioning? The answer Foucault gives in *La philosophie analytique de la politique* consists in a sort of methodological rule, which is at the same time a fundamental *attitude* we should assume when confronting the issue of power, if we want philosophy to play a *critical* role towards it. Now, in order to play a critical role *vis-à-vis* power, Foucault argues, philosophy should stop conceiving itself as a prophecy, as a pedagogy or as a lawgiver: in other words, philosophy should stop trying to impose its own law, to teach people what they ought to do, what is right and what is wrong. Philosophy—and political philosophy in particular—should pose the issue of power in terms of existence, instead of in terms of good or bad: it should content itself with observing and describing reality. So, posing the issue of power in terms of existence means posing a very

naïve question: “essentially, what do power relations consist in?”⁸ This question lies at the heart of what Foucault calls an “analytic philosophy of politics,” or an “analytico-political philosophy,” which has nothing to do with what is called “analytic political philosophy.” In fact, far from referring to John Rawls, Foucault draws inspiration from Wittgenstein: “We have long known that the role of philosophy is not to discover what is hidden, but to render visible what precisely is visible, which is to say, to make appear what is so close, so immediate, so intimately linked to ourselves that, as a consequence, we do not perceive it.”⁹ Foucault here is quoting almost verbatim paragraphs 126 and 129 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, where Wittgenstein writes: “Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything.—Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. [...] The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one’s eyes.)”¹⁰ Philosophy at the same time asks us and forces us to open our eyes.

Therefore, precisely like ordinary language philosophy, which puts forward “a critical analysis of thought starting from the way we [ordinarily] say things,” the task of Foucault’s analytic philosophy of politics is to describe “what ordinarily happens in power relations;” and like ordinary language philosophy, which avoids any massive qualification or disqualification of language by simply noticing that language is played (“*le langage, cela se joue*”), the task of Foucault’s analytico-political philosophy is not to praise or to blame power relations as such, but to show that power relations, too, are played (“*les relations*

de pouvoir, également, cela se joue"): power relations are "games of power that we should study in terms of tactics and strategy, in terms of rule and accident, in terms of stakes (*enjeu*) and target."¹¹ This is why Foucault chooses to study localized and humble games of power, which usually do not retain the attention of political philosophers—games of power around madness, illness, delinquency, abnormality, prison, sexuality, etc. He studies these kinds of power relations because, as he says in *La philosophie analytique de la politique*, they involve issues that constitute "the texture of our everyday life," and it is precisely this *ordinary* texture that is crucially important to see and to show.¹² Thus, we are confronted here with the task, not so much of refusing, as of radically *short-circuiting* the traditional approach to political philosophy, and of "bringing it back"¹³ to the dimension of everyday power relations.

But, in order to avoid any possible misunderstanding, I would like to stress that, according to Foucault, an analytic philosophy of politics that limits itself to the task of describing, analyzing, making visible the reality and concrete functioning of power relations, enables *at the same time* to "intensify the struggles that develop around power, the strategies of the antagonists within power relations, the tactics pursued, the *foyers* of resistance."¹⁴ As Foucault declares in a stunning 1980 interview: "I'm not a prophet, I'm not an organizer, I don't want to tell people what they should do. [...] I try to analyze a real situation in its various complexities, with the goal of allowing refusal, curiosity, and innovation."¹⁵

NOTES

- 1 M. Foucault, *Théories et institutions pénales. Cours au Collège de France. 1971-1972*, unpublished, transcription of the manuscript realized by E. Basso, p. 1.
- 2 M. Foucault, *La philosophie analytique de la politique* (1978), in Id., *Dits et écrits II, 1976-1988*, ed. D. Defert and F. Ewald, Paris, Gallimard, 2001, pp. 534-551.
- 3 See A.I. Davidson, *Structures and Strategies of Discourse. Remarks Towards a History of Foucault's Philosophy of Language*, in Id. (ed.), *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1997, pp. 1-17; Id., *The Emergence of Sexuality. Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2001, pp. 178-191; Id., *Introduction*, in M. Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended". Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*, ed. M. Bertani and A. Fontana, trans. D. Macey, New York, Picador, 2003, pp. xv-xxii.
- 4 M. Foucault, unpublished letter to D. Defert (1967), quoted in A.I. Davidson, *Structures and Strategies of Discourse*, p. 5.
- 5 See M. Foucault, *Le discours ne doit pas être pris comme...* (1976), in Id., *Dits et écrits II*, pp. 123-124.
- 6 M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I. An Introduction* (1976), trans. R. Hurley, New York, Pantheon Books, 1978, pp. 87-88.
- 7 *Ibidem*, p. 86.
- 8 M. Foucault, *La philosophie analytique de la politique*, p. 540.
- 9 *Ibidem*, pp. 540-541.
- 10 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1958, §§ 126 and 129, p. 50.
- 11 M. Foucault, *La philosophie analytique de la politique*, pp. 541-542.
- 12 *Ibidem*, pp. 542-543.
- 13 See L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 116, p. 48: "What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use."

- 14 M. Foucault, *La philosophie analytique de la politique*, p. 540.
- 15 M. Foucault, *Power, Moral Values, and the Intellectual* (1980), an interview conducted by M. Bess, <<http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/historydept/michaelbess/Foucault%20Interview>> (accessed on 10-10-2013). For the original French version of this interview, see M. Foucault, *L'origine de l'herméneutique de soi. Conférences prononcées à Dartmouth College, 1980*, ed. H.-P. Fruchaud and D. Lorenzini, Paris, Vrin, 2013, pp. 143-155 (here p. 154).