FOUCAULT & EDUCATIONAL REFORM
by
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When Michael Foucault was given the chance to name his own professorial chair at the College de France, a position he occupied for many years, he chose the magisterial title "Professor of the History of Systems of Thought." Such a title must have seemed pretentious to his critics, but the sweep of Foucault's philosophizing before his premature death in 1984 justifies the name. Even his fierce opponent Jurgen Habermas, heir to the Frankfurt School legacy so problematized by Foucault and others, had to concede at Foucault's death that, "within the circle of the philosophers of my generation who diagnose our times, Foucault has most lastingly influenced the *Zeitgeist*."

Part of the reason for Foucault's continuing relevance (which can be indirectly measured by the growing shelf space today filled by Foucault commentaries) is the approach which characterized so much of his early work. It was for a time Foucault's standard method to diagnose the ills of mass society by doing a close critical analysis of some particular institution of total control, and then to observe how such places stood as microcosms of larger forces. Schools, mental asylums, prisons: these and other institutions, Foucault thought, reveal the strategies entire cultures use to deal with opposition, construct self-identities, and manage collective power.

In contrast to those who believe that Western societies have participated in an irregular but forceful March of Progress, Foucault's work is a warning against such optimism. Instead, it calls on readers to look carefully so they can see the subtle ways power is deployed to manipulate others. In his book on the history of sexuality (volume 1), for example, Foucault rewrites the historical account, the standard version of which goes something like this: People used to be hung up and repressed about sex (we called such attitudes "Victorian"). But today we are "sexually liberated." Supposedly no one cares today whether others are gay or straight, sexually conservative or promiscuous, or what their preferences are. It's the age of "no fault" divorce and "live and let live."

Foucault saw the issue differently. While there was no denying that legal prohibitions on controversial sexual conduct had been loosened and liberalized (most jurisdictions don't throw someone into prison for being gay anymore), Foucault emphasized how such legal trends tell only part of the story. His work traces the nuanced, often covert ways our culture continues to enforce sexual norms by the use of education, childrearing, and immersion in language traditions that stigmatize people different from the norm.

Or consider an example more closely relevant to this year's educational reform topic, which concerns Foucault's analysis of the prison system. Foucault found himself interested in a never-realized proposal for prison construction envisioned by the English utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Bentham called his proposed prison the Panopticon. The idea arose from his opposition to prisons that simply warehoused convicts, insufficiently rehabilitating them. This was the height of negligence, in his view, since most crime was caused by something controllable: the fact that criminals were inadequately exposed to norms which shame most people into leading law-abiding lives. Thus, people who know they are being watched, and are therefore always conscious of the social consequences of their actions, were thought less likely to violate norms designed to sustain broader community. The Panopticon was a design intended to place prisoners under constant surveillance, to thereby shame them into lives of rectitude. All the cells faced into an interior courtyard occupied by guards. Day and night every single activity of the prisoner would be in full and public view. At least the design was intended to make prisoners think so.

The Panopticon, for Foucault, teaches us something important about contemporary culture, more than just the history of prison reform. Foucault saw modern society as placing all of us under surveillance. In the age of security cameras, high-tech miniaturized equipment, interactive television, digital cameras, and the World Wide Web, we are increasingly acculturated to think we are always being watched, if only by anonymous security guards. Foucault was interested in how our resulting self-concepts cause us to interact differently with others, how the knowledge that we are always watched causes us to discipline our own behaviors, wholly outside of official legal prohibition.

As these examples illustrate, Michael Foucault's restless curiosity has made his work a subject of continuing interest for philosophers, but also for historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and others. In my own field of communication studies, for example, Foucault's work on the disciplinary power of language structures has been quite influential. In the remainder of this essay I want to describe the relevance of all this for policy debate, centered as it is this year on educational reform. Then I will quickly review some of the major questions you might want to consider in preparing to argue for or against the Foucault critique.

Educational Institutions as Centers of Disciplinary Power

Today, readers of Foucauldian philosophy often start with the observation that Foucault was concerned mostly with power: how it is created by institutions, how it circulates in society (often invisibly), and how it can be resisted, if at all. While useful in some ways, reading Foucault as singlemindedly interested in power relationships oversimplifies the issues he addressed. At one time, in fact, Foucault insisted "the goal of my work in the past twenty years has not been to analyze the phenomena of power." Instead, he wrote, his interest was in creating "a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects."

Such a distinction sounds confusing, but it is no less important on that account. To clarify the point it may be useful to think about a "debate" Foucault once had with the noted MIT linguistic theorist Noam Chomsky on Dutch television. As the episode is recounted by Paul Rabinow, the exchange revealed an important disagreement. For Chomsky the starting place for the investigation of human behavior is agreement

on the essential nature of human beings. If "human nature" is not a relatively stable or fixed idea, then how can we even begin to generalize our scientific findings to all of humanity? By comparison, Foucault shifted the question: he was less interested, it turned out, in knowing the fundamental and unchanging nature of human beings than in knowing how the concept of human nature had changed over time. One might say that Foucault's work centers more on the function of "human being" than on the fact of its existence. This is not to say Foucault thinks every human being is different or acts differently. But if we start with an assumption that all humans are the same, we risk missing something important; namely, an understanding of the ways we are *made* the same by the nature of our interactions.

One of the social institutions essential in teaching us to use and respond to power in predictable ways is the school. Schools are what Foucault (and others) call "normalizing institutions." In part Foucault means that, if only because it is organized around the task of educating vast numbers of children, the secondary school setting is institutional and regimented. Students are segmented into precisely timed classes. The arrangement of many classrooms remains rigidly hierarchial: students face forward, arrayed before an authority figure who stands at the front of the room (the students are usually seated), and who is usually addressed formally (as in "Mr. So-and-So, may I use the bathroom please?"). The testing procedures used by many teachers reinforce rote styles of learning and retention, where facts are privileged over concepts, and where kids are taught more for the nationally standardized tests than for intellectual nourishment.

Those who characterize schools and the typical learning situation in this way often mean no insult to teachers, who perform extraordinarily important work, under situations of real stress and often in the absence of meaningful support. But teachers do play their part, if only because of administrative requirements. Working within bureaucratic systems, teachers in the worst schools can too easily find their original passion for teaching replaced by the dull monotony of moving their students through the motions of a lesson plan.

Nor is this to say that education never happens in schools. Wonderful teachers and motivated students can triumph even in the face of challenging obstacles. But even under the best of circumstances, crit-

ics like Foucault and those who write in the so-called "critical pedagogy" tradition (Giroux and others) call attention to the subtle lessons students internalize after spending so many years in regimented classrooms: obedience to authority, a preference for jumping hurdles rather than actually learning material, and an overly respectful sense of the boundaries of appropriate behavior.

Because this year's resolution requires affirmative teams to defend improvements in academic achievement, which are typically measured by use of standardized exams, negatives use Foucault's multifaceted critique of total institutions to argue for the plan's rejection. Since even the best curricular reforms occur in schools whose main mission (according to the critique) is to train students for rote participation in the workplace and unquestioning involvement in civic affairs, judges are asked to reject even wonderful-sounding reforms as piecemeal and co-opting. Rather then reform the system, judges are instructed to reject it. And like many other critique arguments, the Foucault critique is sometimes argues as a "total solvency takeout," on the grounds that attempts at education within such systems of oppression can never succeed.

What is the alternative? Those who opposed Foucault's arguments about the nature of totalizing institutions have done so on many grounds. But perhaps the most abiding criticism is that Foucault so completely credits culture with the power to determine and control human beings that he underestimates or obliterates altogether any possibility for human freedom. In the philosophical literature this attack is often referenced as the "problem of agency." If schools, the state, the corporation, and even language itself control us in ways more subtle than we typically see or conceptualize, then how are we to resist, or resist successfully? Among other attacks, the agency argument has been central in many feminist critiques of Foucault (a literature which provides rich ground for mounting a so-called "counter-critique"). One of Foucault's harshest critics, Christopher Norris, puts it this way: it is "hard to comprehend how the subject [in Foucault] could achieve any degree of autonomy, given the extent to which, on Foucault's own submission, this freedom is necessarily shaped or constrained by existing structures of regulative control," Norris finds Foucault's conception of individuality so cramped that any particular man or woman is, in such a world,

nothing more than a "place-filler," the mere "product of various contending forces."

To find Foucault's answer (and the answer is not completely clear in his work) one must attend closely to the emphasis of his later writing, which centers on Ethics (this is the subject, incidentally, of his second and third volumes on sexuality). As he described the term in his essay "On the Genealogy of Ethics," he means the term to reference "the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself…., which determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own actions." As the quote implies, the project of ethical living is a local one, accomplished step by step, person by person. It is clear that Foucault does not consider this effort a futile gesture - there is the implicit assumption that individuals can transform their circumstances (or their relationship to them) by asserting their own influence (deploying their own power). In fact there is so much implicit potential for freedom in such an idea that some have wondered whether Foucault was renouncing his earlier work on culture by making the argument, though Foucault vigorously denied any fundamental break in his work. Importantly, Foucault was not interested in ethics as empty philosophical abstraction: as his work on the history of sexuality reveals, his concern is with ethical *practice,* even to the extent of an elaborate focus on what he calls the aesthetics of ethics (i.e., the style one brings to one's engagement with others).

In the context of debate critiques centered on Foucault, those arguing for rejection of the plan often attempt to persuade the judge to use their ballot to assert their own ethical conduct. By choosing to reject educational reformism, debaters and judges are said to assert their own unwillingness to be the hostages of totalizing institutions. Of course there is a certain irony in such advocacy, which is often highlighted by affirmatives in the form of performative contradiction claims: it seems rightly suspicious to say that a judge, who has agreed to participate in the highly regimented, rule-governed, and hierarchical activity of debate, should choose to render her verdict (that is, vote negative, obediently following tournament guidelines) on the grounds that such collaboration is actually a kind of liberation.

Some Final Clarifications
An essay this short cannot hope to

introduce all the dimensions of Foucault's philosophical approach. But in these last few paragraphs I want to draw attention to several issues easily confused when Foucault is argued against education reforms.

One clarification is that Foucault is not arguing against all power. He is not saying that because schools are institutions of power they are necessarily evil as a result. Foucault does not reject the idea of "education" as inevitably dominating or coercive, a point made most clear in his assessment of the classical educational systems (contained in *History of Sexuality*). As Mark Olssen put it in his recent book on Foucault and education, "educating oneself and caring for oneself [Foucault's way of describing ethics] are interconnected activities, especially those aspects of the care of the self for which one seeks a teacher, making them forms of adult education." In reviewing the educational systems of the Greek city-states, Foucault also seems to defend the important role of teachers - he notes that "it was a generally accepted principle that one could not attend to oneself without the help of another." All of this is consistent with Foucault's critiques of total institutions because of his view of the inevitability of power; it would not make sense within a Foucauldian framework to speak of "ending" or "obliterating" power, since power is a certain and unending feature of human interaction. The issue instead is how individuals (in this case, students) can wield power or resist it productively.

Nor is Foucault arguing for the rejection of all systems of organized pedagogy. In fact, if individuals are to create local sites of meaningful resistance, they "must be given the weapons and the courage that will enable [them] to fight all [their] lives." Of course sometimes this education involves "unlearning," ridding oneself of the bad lessons acquired by poor teaching or parenting, but there is no sense I know of in Foucault which requires a complete renunciation of organized schooling. The difficult issue for debaters to resolve is whether a system as supposedly corrupt as the American public schools can ever truly serve as a vehicle for emancipatory learning.

Finally: a quick statement about the use of Foucault in educational studies. The incorporation of Foucault's work in educational studies is rather recent, but the attention given him by theorists of the educational process has recently exploded. Much of the educational writing on Foucault done in the 1980's and early 1990's is concentrated on proving the utility of Foucault's work for educational philosophy. I particularly recommend the work of James Marshall, who has been prolific on the issue. Marshall's work uses Foucault to stress how the educational establishment participates in the broader project of classical humanism and Enlightment liberalism, and argues against the still-prevalent idea that education assures collective Progress and Autonomy. One of Marshall's main claims is that an appreciation of Foucault can help us understand how modern institutions of government are organized to produce governable individuals who are especially susceptible to state control because they are taught to believe they are free.

Recent scholarship has clarified how Foucault's perspectives can illuminate educational psychology, and this is among the most direct routes to evidence on this topic, given its standardized testing focus. Foucauldian scholarship in the educational psychology area criticizes how testing operates as a form of administrative control within the learning process, with stultifying results. Mark Olssen's 1993 essay on the subject in the journal *Educational Psychology* is a good starting place for such a perspective.

Take advantage of this topic's opportunity to explore Michel Foucault's rich philosophizing. Most students find his work accessible, historically interesting, and thought-provoking, even if they end up unpersuaded. But even for those, the journey is worth the effort.

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