

Notes on *The Order of Discourse*

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Notes on Michel Foucault's *The Order of Discourse*, an inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, given on Dec. 2, 1970, and published in French as *L'Ordre du Discours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970). (1)

Foucault begins by commenting on the context of his own discourse — stage fright, the fear of speaking out, the institutional context. He opposes the automatisms which would make us let discourse speak through us (as in Beckett's *The Unnamable*). (2) Desire wants a transparent discourse, one which carries us along, not an order full of hazard and risk. On the other hand, institutions try to control discourse through the very gesture of giving it a place. But discourse (*Foucault's discourse, by implication*) has a subversive power, beyond desire and institutions. Therefore, he assumes "that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality" ("The Order of Discourse" 52).

A) *Procedures of exclusion*

1) *Prohibition*. The subject matter of discourse may be forbidden; so may the speaker, or the occasion. E.g. sexuality and politics are often forbidden. But they proliferate through discourse, instead of becoming extinguished. Discourse is also an object of desire, a power to get hold of, not just a medium.

2) *Division of discourses, or rejection*. Such is the opposition between madness and reason. The discourse of madness is rejected, taken as noise, but it has a strange circulation: the "wise madman" was given a say only

on the stage. Today the same division is played otherwise, filtered through the discourse of psychoanalysis, etc.

3) *The opposition between truth and falsity.* The will to know is governed by a system of exclusions. The ancient discourse of truth in Greece had a performative nature, it was linked to power: but in the fifth century BC, the discourse of truth became linked to its meaning, its reference, the value of the utterance. Truth becomes semantic: it is displaced from the act to the utterance. It is the origin of philosophy, of the will to truth, born in opposition to the sophists. There is an evolution in this will to truth, not always due to a discovery. Around 1600 (*Foucault is probably thinking of Francis Bacon's philosophical and theoretical works*) there is a new regime of classification and mensuration being born in England. It is the origin of technicism/positivism. The will to truth has a history of its own, which is not the history of constraining truths: a history of the delimitation of methods, of the objects of knowledge... It is sustained by institutional practices, among them the use of knowledge. This "truth" exerts pressure on the other discourses, which converge towards the discourse of truth. (E.g. realist or sincere literature). The penal code is no longer founded on power or spectacle, but on the scientific discourse of psychology, psychiatry, etc. (*See on this point Foucault's work Discipline and Punish*). That is, procedures of exclusion (1) and (2) become subordinated to (3): they become more fragile, while (3) grows all the time. But (3) is masked: in the sense that it necessarily ignores its links with power and desire. In Nietzsche, Artaud, Bataille... we appreciate a will to truth turned towards a critique of the notion of truth itself; they are the models for Foucault's analysis.

B) Internal procedures

Other procedures for the control of discourse are internal—principles of order within the discourses themselves.

4) *Commentary.* That is, the division between canonical texts and their commentaries. Some texts are privileged (the canon, in religion, law, literature or science); others are commentaries of these major texts. This

hierarchy is always active, this opposition between the "truly original" text and the commentary, in spite of diverse blurrings. For instance, Borges and others suppress one of the terms (e.g. writing commentaries of imaginary texts), but not the relationship itself.

"By a paradox which it always displaces but never escapes, the commentary must say for the first time what had, nonetheless, already been said, and must repeat what had, however, never been said. (...) Commentary exorcises the chance element of discourse by giving it its due: it allows us to say something other than the text itself, but on condition that it is this text itself which is said, and in a sense completed." ("The Order of Discourse" 58) [\(3\)](#)

5) *The author* (as a principle for the grouping of discourses, a principle of unity and origin of their signification, as a focus of coherence) is another "principle of rarefaction" in discourse. The name of the author has a different use and value in scientific discourse and in literary discourse; these two types of discourse have exchanged their faith in the author since the Middle Ages. Scientific authors are no longer treated as authorities, but in literature "The author is what gives the disturbing language of fiction its unities, its nodes of coherence, its insertion of in the real" (58). The individual in question receives his modes of behaviour from the author-function as it is defined in his age, "or as he modifies it in his turn" (59).

"The commentary-principle limits the chance element in discourse by the play of an identity which would take the form of repetition and sameness. The author-principle limits this same element of chance by the play of an identity which has the form of individuality and the self". (59)

(On the author-funcion as a principle of constraint and production, Foucault's observations here must of course be complemented with his paper "What Is an Author?").

6) *Disciplinarity*. Disciplines constitute an anonymous system, as against

(4) and (5). There is a constant need for new formulations, for new propositions within the discipline. Disciplines define the kind of discourse on their object which will become a part of the discipline (not just any kind of discourse). For instance, from the eighteenth century the discourse of botany no longer includes the symbolic values of plants, which also fell within its purview for instance in the sixteenth century. Disciplines have theoretical horizons. (*This kind of analysis is undertaken in Foucault's works The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences. Foucault's analysis at this point is to be related with [T. S. Kuhn's notions of paradigm and scientific revolution](#), and with [Paul Feyerabend's critique of disciplinary methodology](#)). In order to be recognized as such by a discipline, in order to be true or false, a discourse must be "in the true", it must in a sense play the game of the discipline, accept its discourse. Disciplines are also a principle of control of the production of discourse; they fix limits to what can be said within the discipline. They are at once an element of constraint and an element of creation and proliferation. But let us examine another set of principles linked to constraint:*

C) Conditions of access to discourse, for instance

7) *The qualification of the speaking subject* to enter the order of discourse. Rituals define this qualification, as well as the signs which must accompany the discourse.

8) *Societies of discourse*, which preserve discourses and make them circulate within a closed space. Today they are loose, but the very act of writing and publishing in modern societies is a society of discourse in the wider sense. Literary conventions as well as technical or scientific secrets, set their own constraints.

(*Curiously enough, Foucault does not draw attention to the role of academic societies, universities, etc. as societies of discourse in the most literal sense. Whereas it could be argued that the University is itself a materialized society of discourse, an official society of disciplinary discourse, physically and administratively organized in the shape of buildings, departments, and groups of teachers. The role of societies of*

discourse in shaping attention should be studied within the wider anthropological context of attention-shaping strategies in human groups. See e.g. Brian Boyd's analysis in The Origin of Stories, and my paper ["Atención a la atención"](#)).

9) *Doctrines*— They belong to a group, but they tend to become disseminated, and to require the allegiance of individuals. "Heresy and orthodoxy do not derive from a fanatical exaggeration of the doctrinal mechanisms, but rather belong fundamentally to them". (64) Doctrine is a way of binding individuals to certain types of enunciation. But it is also an enunciation which functions as a sign which binds the individuals in a group (a double binding).

10) *Appropriation*—*i.e. the social appropriation of discourse.* Discursive value being an object of desire. (Here one thinks of such works as Pierre Bourdieu's studies of symbolic value in Language and Symbolic Power, or the essays collected in *Shakespeare and Appropriation*, ed. Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer). Social appropriation takes place, for instance, through educational systems.

One should note, Foucault adds, that all these types for the subjection and ordering of discourse are found mixed up or combined, their separation is an act of abstraction. (And one should stress the double action of these mechanisms: the existence of doctrines or disciplines, the qualification of a subject to speak, etc., are not only a means for the "rarefaction" or constraining of discourse, but also a principle of proliferation of discourse along certain lines or in certain contexts—a stimulus for the production of certain kinds of discourse, e.g. research papers, sermons, poems... They may constitute the very conditions of possibility for those discourses to exist).

Philosophical themes

A number of notions promoted by philosophers develop in keeping with these activities of limitation and exclusion of discourse. For instance: the notion of *ideal truth* as the law of discourse, of *immanent rationality* as a

principle of unfolding for discourse. The *desire for truth itself*, or the *ability to think it*. Philosophical discourse in the West presents itself as a simple putting into words of a preexisting thought—or conversely (*this would be the case for structuralist views on the matter*) thought would be the mere effect of preexisting linguistic structures. (*One thinks of Derrida's critique of "logocentrism", e.g. in De la grammatologie — according to him, the philosophical tradition of the West tries to present the ideality of the pure presence of thought or meaning, evading the recognition of the materiality of signs, texts, discourses, etc. which articulate or shape it*). There exists, therefore, an elision of the reality of discourse, through a variety of means.

65 - a) By means of the founding subject, which manifests himself without needing to pass through the instance of discourse in order to give shape to his message.

b) By means of the originating experience, an experience which presupposes the existence of previous significations in the world, of which the discourse would be a discreet reading. (*Here Foucault's critique of Heidegger's approach to meaning is adumbrated*).

c) Or by means of the universal mediation, where everything is apparently discourse and concept, but discourse rests on its own self-consciousness, "little more than the gleaming of a truth in the process of being born to its own gaze" (66).

(a)=writing; (b)=reading; (c)=exchange

—All three put at stake only signs; discourse is reduced to the signifier. Which shows the special logophilia of our civilisation, due to a fear that discourse might escape control; it is, then, really, a logophobia.

This would deserve analysis; "we must call into question our will to truth, restore to discourse its character as an event, and finally throw off the sovereignty of the signifier" (66).

67 - The way to do that would be:

- A reversal of the analytic tradition. Whatever is valued as creative, productive or ideal should be under suspicion.
- A discontinuity: one should not privilege or idealise repressed discourses; discourses are discontinuous practices which cross each other, are juxtaposed, or ignore one another.
- A principle of specificity: Against the myth consisting in the belief that what is deciphered is a pre-existing signification. We should conceive of discourse as a violence done to things; the world as such is not discursive in nature.
- A principle of exteriority: we must analyse the external conditions which make discourse possible.

"Term for term, we find the notion of event opposed to that of creation, series opposed to unity, regularity opposed to originality, and condition of possibility opposed to signification" (67).

68- Against prevailing notions of origin and essence.

Today, history does not turn away from the study of events; rather, the field of study is broadened, new configurations of events are conceived; "history does not consider an event without defining the series of which it is a part, without specifying the mode of analysis from which that series derives", etc., it establishes "diverse series, intertwined and often divergent but not autonomous, which enable us to circumscribe the 'place' of the event, the margins of its chance variability, and the conditions of its appearance" (68) (*A kind of "anchoring" of events in a structure or matrix. Cf. Fredric Jameson's concept of "cognitive mapping", or my notion of [narrative anchoring](#)*).⁽⁴⁾ Fundamental notions here would be "those of the event and the series, along with the play of the notions which are linked to them: regularity, dimension of chance (aléa), discontinuity, dependence, transformation" (68).

Discourse may be understood as a set of discourse events; but which

status do those events have? A materiality of the incorporeal must be taken into account, "the philosophy of the event should move in the at first sight paradoxical direction of a materialism of the incorporeal" (69)

Series of discursive events are heterogeneous because the discourses break up the subject and the instant into a plurality of possible positions and functions. "This kind of discontinuity strikes and invalidates the smallest units that were traditionally recognised and which are the hardest to contest: the instant and the subject" (69).

Chance, the discontinuous, and materiality should be introduced at the roots of thought (whereas traditionally they have been exorcised, "narrating the continuous unravelling of an ideal necessity" (69). (*One finds here on Foucault's part a certain critique of narrativisation, of the construction of well-made histories from a retrospective stance. See my critique of the notion of hindsight bias as an active principle in criticism and theory, [Objects in the Rearview Mirror May Appear More Solid Than They Are](#)*).

Foucault suggests that we establish a link between history and the specific practices of historians. (*This is in a way the programme of cultural materialists in the English-speaking world; see for instance Materialist Shakespeare, ed. Ivo Kamps, or Political Shakespeare, ed. Dollimore and Sinfield*).

70 - Foucault proposes two kinds of analyses for the future: (a) critical; (b) genealogical.

(a) Critical analysis, based on "reversal"; (b) genealogical analysis, based on the three other principles: analysis of series, of norms, of conditions of appearance or variation.

(1) The critical analysis will study the exclusion functions (for instance, the rise of truth vs falsity, reason vs. madness, sexuality and its evolution... (*Here Foucault refers us implicitly to his own analyses, either past, in Madness and Civilisation, or future, as in The History of Sexuality; "The Order of Discourse" sketches a whole critical programme*

developed at large in the whole of Foucault's work).

(2) An analysis of the birth of the sciences of the gaze.

(3) A study of the great foundational acts of modern science in the 19th century, the positivist ideologies of industrial society.

71- These are "three stages of our philistinism".

Also, a study of the "scientific" expertise underpinning the penal code. In this direction, one must also engage the study of the procedures of limitation of discourse (the author, the commentary, the discipline)—for instance in the history of medicine.

Or one can study the birth of the ideology of the author and the work in literature, displacing "the procedures of religious exegesis, biblical criticism, hagiography, historical or legendary 'lives', autobiography and memoirs" (71). Or carry out a study of the role of Freud in psychoanalysis, etc.

72- (b) A genealogical analysis, which cannot be separated from the critical analysis—"any critical task, putting in question the instances of control, must at the same time analyse the discursive regularities through which they are formed"(72). There is, nonetheless, a difference in perspective.

Every discourse series has its own form of regularity, and the constitution of a new system out of the old ones is not smooth. (*One must refer at this point to the notion of episteme explained by Foucault in The Order of Things, or to the notion of scientific revolutions, quite close to structuralist analysis, developed by T. S. Kuhn*).

The critical perspective (a) studies the principles of control of discourse; the genealogical approach (b) studies the formation of domains of objects by means of discourse, the genesis of the possibility of truth. There is a simultaneous rarefaction and affirmation of discourse, but this perspective does not reveal the universality of the signifier or its universal coherence or abundance or dominance (*in this sense there is no deterministic "structuralism" in Foucault's approach. Note the emphasis he places on the productiveness of scarcity—i.e. the productiveness of power which*

makes discourses scarce or privileges certain discourses).

Models for this analysis are to be found in the work of Dumézil, who transcends both traditional exegesis and linguistic formalism by means of comparison, in his studies of the transformation of discourses and of their relationships to the institutions.

74- Also in Canguilhem, who in his studies of the history of science approaches science as a history of models and of conceptual instruments, not as a chronicle.⁽⁵⁾ Also in Jean Hyppolite, a Hegelian who allows us to escape from Hegel while measuring our debt to him. Is a non-Hegelian philosophy possible, Foucault asks?

75- Philosophy is conceived by Hyppolite as a process, always questioning. It is in a shifting contact with non-philosophy, with the other disciplines of knowledge (—with psychoanalysis, mathematics...). In Hyppolite's work one finds a study of the foundations of philosophical discourse and of its formal structure; one faces the problem of philosophy —i.e. the problem of philosophical discourse, a discourse which aspires to the absolute but which nonetheless comes from a particular and localized subject.

With a soberly emotional homage to his teacher Hyppolite, Foucault closes his discourse on discourse, one which is also both universal and historically situated.

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Appendix

The English edition of this essay cited here, "The Order of Discourse", is to be found in Robert Young's anthology *Untying the Text: A Post-structuralist reader* (London: Routledge, 1981). Here follow some of Young's prefatory observations on Foucault's text.

48- This work is for Foucault a self-criticism, a reflection on his own evolution from an "archaeology" to a "cartography" with more direct political consequences. Discursive practices delimit the fields of objects and the perspectives of the knowing subject, the fixing of norms for the elaboration of concepts and theories ("Language, Counter-Memory, Practice"). It is impossible to think outside the limits set by the discursive practices (it would be madness). Therefore, knowledge, understanding, is linked to issues

of power and dominance.

49- Discourse is defined as a play between desire and the institutions (which might be compared to the play between the id and the I). Analysis separates one from the other. There are procedures for the domination of discourse: exclusion and prohibition, and restrictive principles—rarefaction, disciplines. Rules for the use of discourse are set down. Foucault rejects the notion of a founding subject or foundational, original experiences, in hermeneutics and in phenomenology.

50- Foucault opposes neo-Hegelianism, and also the analysis which reduces discursive practices to textual traces (which is Derrida's approach). He advocates a reversal: madness undermines philosophy and thought. Foucault wants to treat discourses as discontinuous phenomena; his thought is opposed to the notion of a unity in works, in periods... He seems to imply a powerful determinism here; later he will come to emphasize the possibility of resistance.

51- As can be seen in Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces power structures, but also undermines and exposes them, makes them fragile and opens up the possibility of frustrating the designs of power.

NOTES

(1). Page references (parenthetical or at the start of the paragraph) and literal quotations come from the English translation by Ian McLeod, published in *Untying the Text: A Poststructuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (London: Routledge, 1981). Parenthetical comments in italics in the text, and the endnotes, are by Jose Angel García Landa. These notes were taken *c.* 1990, and edited in 2011-13. A [summary in French](#) can be found in *Vanity Fea*.

(2). On Beckett's *The Unnamable*, see my paper "Lenguaje y *différance* en *El Innombrable*."

(3). An alternative take on this function of commentary is to be found in my paper on [the hermeneutic spiral](#) ("Retroactive Thematization, Interaction, and Interpretation").

(4). See my comments on Jameson's "Cognitive mapping" and my paper "Too True to Be Good: Cartografía Narrativa" as well as "Harry Thompson, *This Thing of Darkness*: Anclaje narrativo".

(5). Vázquez García (2014) makes a strong emphasis for a heavier debt to Canguilhem on Foucault's part than is usually acknowledged.

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