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Foucault's 'specific intellectual' What consequences for today?

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Twenty-one years after his death, one can reasonably question the importance of Foucault's work and conceptualizations on today's political situation: is there anything left that could be relevant to understanding the present day socio-political environment? Or is Foucault just an important thinker whose thought belongs to an academic arena, as part of the intellectual history of a far past, in a period where intellectuals no longer seem to adopt positions such as Sartre's, for instance, after World War II; and where they eventually write political essays but stay away from practical engagement ?[1] There are intellectuals who engage in political struggles, such as the geneticist Albert Jaccard, or the bishop Gaillot, who with others support undocumented workers or people who cannot get access to proper housing. But these movements are usually limited in scope and in range. They are closer to grass root movements where intellectuals do not play a particular role, but are 'there' in a way for the demonstrators or the people who squat in empty flats or offices. A counter example is of course Pierre Bourdieu who, before his death, became a sort of universalist spokesman of the small, the poor, all the victims (*La misère du monde* was the title of one of his books). But to that we will return; the question of the role of the intellectual in society is certainly a core question but it is surprisingly rarely, if ever, mentioned. In this regard, turning back to Foucault's conceptualization may help understand this aporia, whereas there is, at the same time, a tremendous row making use of the vocabulary of politics, mass demonstrations including contradictory corporate interests, demonstrations with clear-cut and simplistic slogans able to bring together different sections or groups. It is in trying to analyze these apparent paradoxes that reading Foucault is useful. In the first part

I will present Foucault's concept of the specific intellectual and then try, in a second section, to demonstrate how this concept may be used as the basis for what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari called micropolitics (1980).

Michel Foucault introduces the concept of the specific intellectual in an interview published in 1977, in the journal *L'Arc*, subtitled 'Crisis in the Head' (La crise dans la tête). He first analyzes what he calls the universalist intellectual that appears in the XIXth century and in the beginning of the XXth. He posits that such a figure is the result of a specific political situation in France in the XVIIIth century, namely the Man of Justice, the Man of Law who opposes despotism, abuse and the arrogance of powers conferred by wealth in the name of an ideal idea of Law, a Law of justice and equity. All the big XVIIIth century political battles were fought in the name of the law, the question of rights, and the constitution. They all deal with what is fair in relation to reason and nature, with what may and should have a universal value. Thus, dealing with what he calls the political intellectual, Foucault traces back the universalist intellectual's origin to this phenomenon: namely, a man who claims his position according to the universalist idea that law should be fair. And with this move Foucault links the universalist intellectual to a hybrid figure of a notary public and jurist – one who is intimately involved with *a writing*, a specialised *type of scribe*. If Voltaire is prototypical of this kind of universal intellectual it is because he battled against injustice and intolerance; his status is linked to his position as a writer, as a polemicist. As with the French Declaration of Rights, Voltaire also addresses humanity as a whole – not just the people of France (at least on a formal level, since he never spoke up against slavery, for instance). What is then the difference between this sort of intellectual and the specific intellectual? In conceptualising this shift Foucault highlights one major issue: the relationship between science and power, and more precisely the famous mechanism (in French, *dispositif*) of knowledge/power.

Let us demonstrate Foucault's process of conceptualization at this point. In the fifties, a Soviet biologist named Lyssenko stated that there was Socialist science on the one hand, which was truly scientific, and Capitalist science on the other, which could only be erroneous. Foucault stresses that it was here, perhaps for the first time, that the relations between power and science were so crudely expressed and he notices that, in the Cold War atmosphere, this crucial issue was raised more on an ideological than a scientific or political level. Foucault's interview shows that this conception underpinned

his first books, such as the 1977 text, *History of Madness (Histoire de folie)*; and if it seemed to disentangle the relations between knowledge and power in the elevated case of physics, it might also be possible in the case of the more 'human' sciences such as psychiatry.

Foucault asks the crucial question: is it possible to unknit, or unknot the effects of power and knowledge in this peculiar field, psychiatry[2]? Committing himself to such a duty, Foucault tried to identify and analyze the abrupt turns, or changes, and hasty evolutions, that broke the calm continuity many historians assumed, or rather, seemed intent on substantiating. It is not because the phenomena associated with these fields are particularly rapid or extensive that they need consideration, but because they illustrate something else happening, something new. In other words, they indicate a change in the rules that shape the enunciation of what is accepted as scientifically true. This does not mean necessarily a change in content, or theoretical orientation; it has to do with something quite different. It deals with the fact that rather than a power being exerted from the outside on science, power-effects (*effets de pouvoir*) circulate and move as part of scientific enunciation. In other words, one could say that the internal state of scientific institutions is one of a regime of power.

This means that in Foucault's work there is special interest and attention devoted to events – events, he highlights it very clearly, that are evacuated; even, denied in a certain sense, denied by structuralism. This focus is necessary in order to notice the unexpected turns and changes described above. For this reason it is necessary to discriminate between these events, to differentiate between the networks they belong to, and the various levels at which they operate. One must also piece together the threads that link and connect these events and show how they mutually engender one another. Only a conceptualisation in terms of *rapports de force*, of genealogy, of strategic developments and of tactics enables this. Foucault denies the relevance of a separate system of languages and signs to facilitate this, relying instead on one based on war and battles. History is intelligible, not because there is a *sens de l'histoire*, but thanks to its record of battles, their strategies and their tactics. And this, of course, radically questions the then prevailing conception of power in order to dismiss it. Untill then the question of power, according to Foucault, was over-shadowed by the prevailing political conditions: the Cold War. Power was analyzed, depending on your political situation, as totalitarianism in the Soviet system, or class domination in the capitalist countries;

but never was there a detailed analysis of concrete mechanism. Power was identified as a being located in the Winter Palace for the Soviets, or in the 'body' of the State in capitalist countries, and was usually recognised as being held by others. The way Foucault seizes upon this issue is illuminating if one wants to understand the way he conceptualizes the specific intellectual.

The first break is to separate power from its supposed economic infrastructure. As Foucault writes, psychiatric confinement, mental normalization of individuals, and penitentiary institutions are of limited importance if one only searches for their economic meaning. As long as one understands power by subordinating it and bringing it down to economic terms, these social issues remain minor. To be able to deconstruct this vision of power it was necessary to abandon the repressive hypothesis. If one posits that power's action is first and foremost repressive it leads one to adopt a purely jurisdictional definition of power. Such a conceptualization identifies power with a law that says « no », power which is then essentially linked to the strength of a prohibition. Foucault refuses this negative view of power and objects that no one would accept power if it only ever said no. [footnote This remind us of Goethe's Faustus: Ich bin der Geist der stets verneint. (I am the spirit who always says no.)] If power prevails, if we accept it, it is because it is not only a strength (a force) that says " no ", but because it is a force that goes right through things, it produces things, it results in pleasure, it creates knowledge, it produces discourses; one must consider it as a productive network which runs across the whole social body. From the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries onwards a new economy of power was established, i.e., processes which were able to circulate the effects of power – continuously, without interruption, adjusted, individualized – throughout the whole social body – power, not as a negative affect, but as a positive force. This reminds us of Nietzsche's influence on Foucault! Power is not only a positive force, but also disseminated and manifold, power based in each of us: this needs new ways of conceptualizing, new ways of leading political battles. And Foucault points to the importance of May 1968 in relation to understanding power relations. In the extraordinary profusion of tiny, unexpected and joyous battles for life that burst out in May, power relations became her/his power of action, as Spinoza wrote. – Power as a positive force, visible in concrete and everyday situations where each one who was involved could develop and magnify it's specific human agency.

This brings us back to the specific intellectual we started with. And to really understand what Foucault is aiming at, one needs to recall what the universalistic intellectual was: a spokesman for what was supposed to be uni-

versal, what was considered as an appropriate model – what was true and fair for all. This intellectual spoke for others, refining their own ways of perceiving the political issues at stake for them. And Foucault gives a striking example of the first specific intellectual of the XXth century in his sense: Robert Oppenheimer. At one point Oppenheimer was a universalistic intellectual. Once he understood the malefic dangers of the atom bomb, and in the name of Mankind, he protested against the use of atomic power at a universal level. But as Oppenheimer was in the system, as he was speaking from his specific position as an atomic physicist, it immediately led the American government to prosecute him. He was prosecuted, not because of what he said, but because of the position he occupied when saying it. This position changed the whole picture: because he was in charge of the atomic program of the United States, his point of view could no longer be just that of one making a humanitarian appeal; it became a political position endangering the government of the United States. In other words, it was his position as a scientist within the system that led to his prosecution. Making use of his knowledge to warn the world against the dangers of atomic proliferation, he declared that he was not only accountable to the government agency, but towards human society as a whole. In this way, although the content of his protest was humanitarian, by making specific use of his knowledge Oppenheimer becomes a specific intellectual.

After May 1968, as indicated above, these specific intellectuals were all those who, at grass root level, in a specific field (be it in schools, day-care centres, jails, offices) started local battles that could connect with other sectors, where comparable power relations were being questioned. These specific political battles endangered the political system as a whole to a far greater extent than the more visible radical movements which continued class struggles, and who had spokesmen and chiefs who were above local interests. De Gaulle wasn't wrong when he fled to Baden Baden: something really new was happening. People decided they were now in charge of their lives and were beginning to peacefully change society. When Foucault, with Deleuze and other philosophers decided to give voice (Hirschman, 1985, French edition) to the prisoners revolting in the jails by creating the GIP (Information Group on Prisons), their idea was not to talk in place of the prisoners, or to represent them, but to publicize what the prisoners were saying and demanding. Similarly, there were groups of prostitutes who created newspapers to express what they were living through, and what their demands on society were. In

an apparently separate world, staff members in a day-care centre who had never dared to speak up against the Head of the Institution, were now sitting together with her and discussing how to improve everyone's daily life – that of the children as well as that of the adults (Mozere, 1992).

The specific intellectual is not a special intellectual; it is anyone who claims the right to express her/his understanding of the particular situations she/he is involved in and to participate in decisions concerning her/his life – and that has to do with power and politics. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1972, 1980) developed these conceptualizations further in what they called micropolitics. This, at a certain point, is indebted to Foucault's idea of the 'microphysics' of power, but the concept is enriched by using their analysis of the unconscious desire to be political. This means that the specific intellectual is not just a person alone claiming her/his rights, or minding her/his own business; a specific intellectual is part of a being-together with others who are, at the same moment, involved in similar battles. One might think at this point that it is not that far from the trade-unionist, but here again one must stress the difference. The specific intellectual appears *hic et nunc*, not because of any foreseeable or planned political battle, but suddenly – when desire emerges, joins and connects in situ, on an immanent level, different universes, different affects that run through what one thinks are individual people, making them into new incorporations, new rhizomatic networks, new beings and new ways of living.

The specific intellectual is unknown, or invisible, until this peculiar battle, or event, happens. It is in the being together – a temporary being-together – that her/his voice all of a sudden is meaningful and gains scope in changing the pre-existing situation which gave birth to her/his appearance. But such an appearance must only be seen as a production stemming from the process of being-together. The specific intellectual is not a charismatic leader; she/he only appears on the stage as part of a being-together – a temporary arrangement on a specific level, to meet partial goals. And here Felix Guattari (1972) draws a clear line between what he calls subjected groups and non-subjected groups. A subjected group has a program, a leader, and its main goal is to maintain its existence as a group. Its borders strictly delimit what and who belong to the group: membership is a serious matter, and the hierarchical organization of the group tends to assign everyone a specific role and place. Many radical left-wing groups operate this way: the political line must be scrupulously determined and obeyed – leading to schismatic exclusions.

The goal is not to battle for this or that issue, but to make use of them in order to keep control over that particular segment of struggle and legitimize the group's legitimacy to speak in the name of those it fights for.

Quite different is a non-subjected group (Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze later replaced the term by using the concept of collective voice – better expressed in the French as *agencement collectif d'enonciation*). Such a group is without fixed boundaries, and because it has porous and labile outlines it enables changes in positions, in points of view; and favours creativity and the power of action of each member of this temporary being-together. It's flexibility favours the undecided, the improbable, and the fortuitous encounter that Deleuze and Guattari call an *occursus*, encounters which change the way things have until then been understood, seen, and felt. It is a new sensitivity that appears and changes the picture. A non-subjected group has a limited life-span; it creates new being-togethers, new encounters. Deleuze says that it happens because they contaminate other groups, other new eruptions and cereations of being-together. That's what micropolitics has to do; a proliferation of occursuses – [each covered in 'hooks' which are], at each level and moment, directly political because, as Foucault has shown, power is embedded in every cell and tissue of human life and organization.

To conclude this short presentation I will give an account of fieldwork in a day-care centre. In this crèche there was an institutional crisis at the start of the Seventies because one member of staff continuously spanked the children. An early childhood trained kindergarten assistant was severely shocked. This could have led to a predictable pattern for resolving this type of conflict, i.e., telling the head of the day-care centre about this abnormal conduct; that is, playing the hierarchical scene and bringing about change by repressing the incorrect performance of this member of staff. This actually happened, but then an unexpected turn of events occurred which changed the whole picture. Bernadette, the kindergarten assistant, was not just an ordinary kindergarten assistant; she had travelled to Israel after graduating to study the Kibbutz system. There she discovered other ways of educating young children, and when the war broke out, she was working in a day-care centre close to a Palestinian neighbourhood. The Palestinians had to cross the border and she accompanied them to Jordan. There she married a Cyro-Chaldean Christian, pro-Palestinian militant and lived in a refugee camp organizing early childhood activities.

Of course, when she arrived in France she found the hygiene and discipline-oriented day-care centres dreadful and tried to resist the hierarchical system of organisation. When this staff crisis occurred she managed, quite naturally, to bring together all the staff members who agreed with her more anti-authoritarian methods, but she didn't create what Guattari would have called a subjugated group, a group that would have condemned the archaic methods of the more traditional staff members. She didn't draw frontiers to separate the good from the evil, but, on the contrary, tried to create informal pathways which could be used freely by anyone: a door kept open during the general assemblies where a new organization was discussed; a car lift for the staff member who had been criticised; and joking and/or having fun with the children near the other group's territory. Leaving things that could circulate – balls rolling from one room (group territory) to another – opening the invisible but nevertheless strong borders and barriers; and so leaving space and time for encounters developed new opportunities to mix with others, to observe them. No ostracism, no exclusion, but all sorts of what Winnicott might have called transitional objects or, to put it another way, transitional spaces and transitional moments, where exchanges could develop, even briefly. Like the moments meant to reassure, to help, the more traditional staff members to overcome their fear – a smile, a helping gesture – all these tiny moves gradually changed power relations in the group. No one had a once-and-for-ever given position: points of view would evolve, corporal behaviours become more fluid, and the tone of a voice would change. These micropolitics could be understood as a fairy-tale, as a fantasy, or one could think of this crèche as just an ideal, a model day-care centre – one which might even try to gain celebrity and coach other crèches so they could change to the 'right' way. But, luckily that was not the case.

One of the devices which transformed this being-together was a creation, an invitation to become more attentive to the children's needs – not only to be well fed, and well cared for – but also to their desires. This entailed changing adult visions of children's lives, and also their own visions of themselves as adults. The major institutional change was to organize mixed age groups, and suddenly children were seen differently, perceived in another manner. Their, until then, invisible competencies and skills became visible, and it not only changed the [life experiences of the] children in the district, it became a policy the district [authorities themselves actively] supported. That is what Foucault calls the microphysics of power, and Guattari the miniaturization of power issues.

Or to say it in another manner, following Deleuze and Guattari, one is always surprised how the tiny demands of specific being-together groups endanger the established power systems. But to return to the analysis of our day-care centre: the main danger this group was confronted with was to become a subjected group. In a sense, a subjected group has no outside, it has no foreign policy, it is a besieged fortress that always has to defend its integrity (whether moral or territorial), and the purity of its actions or thoughts. In other words, a pure ideal that would risk to be stained or perverted by barbarous nuptials, such as those of a wasp and an orchid (Deleuze, Guattari, 1980), by improbable cross-breeding or misalliances. What is to be highlighted is that once a non-subjected group (un groupe sujet) develops, it contaminates other people, other groups, others areas and the former being-together group splits and proliferates. In our day-care centre, some staff members brought their new creative forces to neighbourhood voluntary organizations; others formed new being-together groups around other issues and also offered them the creative, micropolitical resources they had experienced and treasured. Something stayed vividly alive within the first group, but everyone had enough energy and power of action to make multiple uses of it. Bernadette was a specific intellectual, but being one, she, in turn, made it possible for others to become different specific intellectuals and to challenge the dominant powers, for every micro-level of power can either be used in a repressive way or develop more freedom or power of action. That is why micopolitics is not a secondary battle, it is at the core of the system. And these micropolitics are in tune – strike a chord – at other micropolitical levels that radically change ways of living, ways of thinking. That is something the established system can not accept, a resistance that is everlastingly to be continued. In Gilles Deleuze's beautiful *Abacus*, where he is interviewed by Claire Parnet, for the letter R, he says about Revolution, 'Revolution is only a process. The moment the process transforms itself into an established power, the process is finished. Becoming-revolutionary is always to reinitiate this process.' Quite a task. Let us take it seriously in order not to accept subjection and to resist.

Notes

1. There are numbers of these essays, each defending positions that are mainly to

be understood as attacks against other politically incorrect essays. This sort of quibbling is mainly developed through the medias, but has little political or social effect.

2. In this inerview Foucault specifically refers to psychiatry, but couldn't one infer that the same method can be used for other "social sciences"?

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