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The philosopher as dangerous liar

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Michel Foucault taught that might is right, truth is relative, and history just an interesting narrative. Why do we still lionise the French philosopher?

Upon Michel Foucault's death, 20 years ago this month, the historian Paul Veyne wrote in *Le Monde* that the philosopher's work was "the most important event of thought in our century". The rest of the world was all too ready to agree, and Foucault has become one of the most celebrated philosophers of our times, lauded as the godfather of postmodernism and extending his influence widely and deeply in academe.

Foucault lords over the fields of history, literary theory, queer theory, medicine, philosophy and sociology, and his ideas have permeated society in general. His best-known theses, that the concept of "truth" is relative, that "madness" is a cultural creation and that "history" is mere storytelling, are now familiar fare at enlightened dinner parties (and those contemptuous inverted commas are mandatory).

Yet many lament his persistent appeal. The pervading theme in Foucault's philosophy is that human relations are defined by the struggle for power. Right and wrong, truth and falsehood, are illusions. They are the creation of language and the will to dominate. Socialists, for instance, believe in redistribution of wealth only because they want to get their hands on other people's money. Conservatives maintain the opposite merely because they want to keep hold of their property. Psychiatrists believe there is a thing called insanity only because they want to incarcerate others and subject them to their control and oppressive "gaze". A doctor just likes bossing people around.

Thus, there is no such thing as benevolence: men have created hospitals, schools and prisons not to cure, educate and reform, but to control and dominate "the Other". The rationalism of the Enlightenment was merely a mask for this malevolent impulse.

That this bleak philosophy should have gained such cultural currency is due at least in part to the cult of personality that grew around Foucault. A sarcastic and fiercely intelligent depressive, he took LSD, repeatedly attempted to kill

himself, drove a Jaguar and attended sadomasochist parlours in California. He was also one of the first famous casualties of Aids.

Foucault loved being outrageous. He publicly urged inmates of French jails to escape from prison, and supported the Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution as well as Baader–Meinhof terrorists. He also declared that the happiest day of his life was in July 1978, when he was hit by a car while high on opium. "I had the impression that I was dying, and it was really a very, very intense pleasure," he later told a journalist.

However, one should not underestimate his philosophical appeal. Foucault's nihilism has tapped into a growing mood of pessimism in the west. He represents a generation of leftists who, despairing at the failure and the horrors of the socialist experiments in the postwar era, have sought intellectual solace in apathetic relativism. These postmodern pessimists reject the notion of human rights and progress. They mock the pursuit of reason as a chimera and blame the Enlightenment for everything from colonialism and environmental degradation to Hiroshima and Auschwitz. They owe a debt to Nietzschean anti-humanism, Freudian psychology and Saussurean linguistics, but theirs is also a political reaction.

Foucault was a Marxist who gave up the cause. He came to deride such abstract notions of truth and justice as representing class interests: socialists don't want justice, he told Noam Chomsky in a 1971 television interview – they just seek power. "Our task at the moment is to free ourselves completely from humanism and in that sense our work is political work," he once uttered. "All regimes, east and west, smuggle shoddy goods under the banner of humanism . . . We must denounce these mystifications."

Because there are no values, there can be no judgement. In 1978, looking back on the postwar era, Foucault said: "What could politics mean when it was a question of choosing between Stalin's USSR and Truman's America?" While conservatives will balk at the proposition that the Soviet Union and the west were of moral equivalence, Foucault offered no alternatives for progressives, either: his repudiation of humanism renders impotent the opportunity to challenge any status quo.

Foucault derided the notion of rational justice as a bourgeois fiction, and "truth" as a coefficient of power. He espoused a return to barbarism. He praised the September Massacres of 1792, in which thousands of suspected royalists were butchered, as an admirable example of "popular justice". In *Power/Knowledge* (1980) he called for the abolition of all courts and the adoption of a "proletarian justice", in which there would be no third party present for the accused, no one to examine the evidence, no one to judge the impartiality of the facts. Only

someone with Foucault's twisted logic could advocate tyranny in the name of freedom.

He epitomised what one of his critics called "infantile leftism", an egotistical school of politics which is concerned principally with making gestures; attempting to shock (think Michael Moore) and constantly criticising, but never proffering a coherent alternative. J G Merquior labelled Foucault a quintessential neo-anarchist. Whereas traditional anarchists were inspired by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's mutualism and Kropotkin's co-operatives, and took pride in their embrace of science and humane Enlightenment values, Foucault owes more to the egotistical, destructive spirit of Mikhail Bakunin, whose anarchism luxuriated in its negativity and irrationality. Its beliefs consist entirely of what it opposes. This legacy can be seen in today's "anti-capitalist" demonstrators, who are clear about what they seek to destroy, but rather vague as to what they want to create.

Foucault captured the zeitgeist. His conceit that insanity is an invention of the Renaissance, designed to reify its opposite idea of reason, was gaining currency in the 1960s, when his seminal *Madness and Civilisation* was published. In Britain at this time, R D Laing was popularising the notion that insanity was an invention of modernity and schizophrenia the symptom of bourgeois oppression. Yet the move away from the idea that madness can be comprehended as a medical condition has brought immense suffering to those afflicted by chemical disorders of the brain. Thanks to the Foucauldian suggestion that mental hospitals are oppressive quasi-prisons, thousands of people who are a danger to themselves and to others have been left to fend for themselves in "care in the community" programmes.

Foucault's derision of modern medicine is said to have been prompted by an early personal experience. As a boy, he was taken by his father to a psychiatrist to be "treated" for his sexual interest in men. (Foucault famously loathed his father, a doctor from the bourgeois class.) This event aroused the suspicion in his mind that doctors did not exist to help the afflicted, but to reinforce contemporary mores.

His questioning of the reality of biological maladies and mental illness was doubly ironic: his hero Nietzsche died of syphilis, a physical condition that drove him insane; and Foucault himself succumbed to a disease that he did not believe to exist, having laughed off talk of a "gay plague" as homophobic hysteria.

Michel Foucault was not just wrong; he erased any possibility for proving himself to be right. He asserted that "the author" did not exist, that he or she is condemned to produce a work defined by customs of literature, and created

through a language imposed on the mind from without. How can we believe an author who tells us the author does not exist, who writes in an objective prose that objectivity does not exist, this historian who tells us that we cannot write history? His canon is self-invalidating.

In his 1977 pamphlet *Forget Foucault*, the eminent French social historian Jean Baudrillard argued that Foucault's writings are themselves discourses in power that impose their own narrative, projecting their own will to truth. Those who lionise this "author" today, devoted as they are to this source of power-knowledge, continue to contradict themselves. Perhaps it is time to take heed of Baudrillard's exhortation. Perhaps it is time to forget Foucault.

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