The Review of Politics 77 (2015), 653–659.
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doi:10.1017/S0034670515000637

# Foucault on Freedom and Trust

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Charles Taylor opens the essay "Foucault on Freedom and Truth"[1] with the stark claim: "Foucault disconcerts." Foucault disconcerts, on Taylor's reading, because he appears to repudiate both freedom and truth. Where other Western thinkers have sought to "[make] ordinary life the significant locus of the issues that distinguish the good life," the Foucault of *Discipline and Punish* seems to refuse this Enlightenment valuation.[2] After puzzling alongside Foucault, and the implications of his thought for freedom and truth, Taylor finally queries what drives Foucault to adopt a Nietzschean model of truth and argues to the contrary that we can trust in progressive change from one form of life to another because its politics intuitively derive from our personal discovery of "our sense of ourselves, our *identity*, of what we are."[3] These changes entail that "we have already become something. Questions of freedom can arise for us in the transformations we undergo or project."[4] For Taylor, the link between personal and political discovery is so tight, so intuitive, and such a clear barometer for progress and change, that the insistence on incommensurability, let alone its use to challenge Enlightenment values, simply is perverse. And so Taylor concludes his essay by asking of the late Foucault two questions: "Can we really step outside the identity developed in Western civilization to such a degree that we can repudiate all that comes to us from the Christian understanding of the will?" and "Is the resulting 'aesthetic of existence' all that admirable?"[5]

By the time Taylor's essay was published in May 1984, Foucault had passed away. A conference envisioned on Enlightenment preoccupations around truth and truth telling—one involving Foucault, Habermas, and Taylor, one that might have clarified these debates—never came to pass. In its place, Mark Redhead's *Reasoning with Who We Are* provocatively promises to

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[1]Charles Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," *Political Theory* 12, no. 2 (May 1984): 152–83.
[2]Ibid., 156.
[3]Ibid., 178.
[4]Ibid., 180.
[5]Ibid., 181.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000637 Published online by Cambridge University Press

continue this conversation by offering a new coming-to-terms with liberalism and the liberal self. If Nietzsche urges his readers to "become who you are," then Redhead would have us engage publicly in "reasoning with who we are"—presumably by refining "democratic theory for a not so liberal era." Redhead cites and revisits the challenge, outlined by Taylor, of asking whether and how ordinary life might be the locus of the issues that distinguish the good life—and ups the ante, so to speak, by considering this challenge squarely in terms of the plurality of persons and perspectives so often missing or narrowly construed in earlier liberal accounts of the 1980s and 1990s. In the wake of the politics of the last twenty-five years, liberals now find themselves "reasoning through baggage"—Redhead's portmanteau term for "how we articulate the claims of others, the language through which we recognize others, what ends we advance, what ends we don't even consider" and then "try to tell the truths of ourselves, the standpoint we are reasoning from, while appreciating the fact that we can never do so in a completely 'free' manner" (1). Foucault becomes folded into this project as someone whose late work on ethics offers "a critical framework for evaluating the legitimacy or the lack thereof of actual instances of public reasoning" (20).

The passages of time not only permit us to evaluate Foucault's uncanny anticipation and response to Taylor's questions, it also allows us to revisit the spectral place for Nietzsche in these debates. If Foucault's early work in *Order of Things* and *Archaeology of Knowledge* reflects on the use of knowledge to stabilize conceptual categories (a musing on the third essay of *Genealogy of Morality*), and if his work on punishment and spectacle elaborates on the *Genealogy*'s second essay, then Foucault's late work brings the third essay to bear on a rereading of the first essay on subjectivity.[6] Foucault's late lectures execute both a turn away from that promising, calculable liberal individual who animates the punishing politics of *GM 2*, and a counterpoise to the subjects constituted by power/knowledge who populate *GM 3*. In parallel fashion, if the entirety of Redhead's book addresses the promising, calculable liberal individual in the wake of an illiberal politics, then his reading of Foucault seeks to evaluate what a critique of liberal individualism might offer to politics *now*. That is the reading of Foucault (and implicitly, of Nietzsche) I take up here.

To reprise Taylor's questions as a means of orientation, we might begin with "*Can we really step outside the identity developed in Western civilization to such a degree that we can repudiate all that comes to us from the Christian understanding of the will?*" Redhead asks us to consider our relation to history, as well as the politics that makes us both the subject and the author of the

[6]Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). All subsequent paragraph references are to this volume. *GM 2* refers to the second essay, and *GM 3* to the third essay, of this volume.

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discourses that produce our Western, interiorized selves. Like Taylor, Redhead situates Foucault as preoccupied with a "historical ontology of ourselves" (216). This ontology seeks "to understand the limits of who we can possibly be so as to think through how we might transgress these limits and/or escape from how we are constituted" (216). Redhead asks what critical tools Foucault might offer to those "involved in problems of public reasoning and democratic legitimation" (217). In contrast to Taylor, Redhead recognizes that this process is *not* one of discovery, let alone one of personal discoveries whose intuitions illuminate politics. Instead, Redhead insists that the truth telling associated with the will is not as instrumental or singular in aim as those committed to public reason would have us think.

To problematize and personalize the relation to history, Redhead works through Foucault's turn first to archaeology and then to genealogy. These dislodge the seemingly absolute nature of inner truths, and interrupt their smooth externalization into any political or social imaginary. Redhead exuberantly glosses problematization as the lived and "creative act undertaken by individuals in a specific historical situation that delimits the domain of possible responses to the problem it thematizes" (218). His intuition is to acknowledge the bleed between external discourses and inner truths, and to encourage liberal individuals to trace and critique these in-and-out movements. In short: to allow truth to become a problem. And a problem of democratic legitimation, at that.

But Redhead, in contrast to Foucault, raises these questions of public reason and democratic legitimation from the vantage of the norm rather than the vantage of exclusion. Taylor phrases the question yet more bluntly and asks rhetorically whether anyone could occupy "such an outsider's perspective."[7] Can the capaciousness of pluralism come to grips with incommensurability as a lived experience, and yet still hold on to public reason? Some thirty years later, in the wake of the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner, and in the face of placards reading "I can't breathe" and "black lives matter," one might ask this question about exclusion from anguish not rhetorical skepticism. After all, incommensurability challenges the very heart of the assumption that ordinary lives are the intuitive and inner sources of the good life. Tracking the in-and-out movements of internalization from the vantage of the norm raises the challenge of justification; a normative or political claim can be justified to the extent that it harmonizes with internal affirmation, however grudging. From the vantage of exclusion, however, the challenge is often *not* to tinker with these harmonies or to align citizen and community more closely. Those living on the margins often refuse affirmation by dominant norms and hierarchies altogether and instead launch a wholesale critique of the order these norms sustain. They seek to make visible this ordering and its distance from lived experience—and to undo this

[7]Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," 179.

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ordering altogether. Foucault's aim in calling attention to the inner life of incommensurability is less to dispense with inwardness than to dispense with its forced congruence to social norms and hierarchies.

On Nietzschean terms, Foucault urges that we abandon our "vivisection of the soul" (*GM 3*, §9)—an exploratory, live autopsy on a soul neither living nor material—and that we return from our "perspective seeing" (§12) to the tactile, far-reaching experiences of exclusion in political life. Is this bringing-to-bear of problematization on political subjectivity what Taylor plots as historical imagination or what Redhead terms "reasoning through baggage"? Perhaps. Redhead employs this portmanteau to capture the leftovers, the remainders, the excess that exceed liberalism's paradoxical exhortation to believe in certain, universal values even in the face of their particular failures. Yet one might press further. Rather than viewing these pluralities that teeter on the edge of vibrancy and exclusion as "baggage"—as separate, external, the un-worked-through—the Foucauldian challenge to liberalism might instead be more radically construed. After all, baggage is reasonably separate from and external to oneself; it can be picked up, set down, rummaged through, and repacked. What if the very unreasonability of the exclusions from plurality came from their indistinction from certain subjectivities and personhoods, such that certain lives could *only* be construed as a threat? And what would it mean to seek an ethics out of a refusal of this political order?

One might read, then, the turn to parrhesia as a way to make tractable the lived disjuncture between ethical and political lives. The daily practices of parrhesia offer a way to make these Kantian commitments to problematization lived rather than either cerebral or received from a dominant political or cultural class. Redhead gently suggests that its practices are not unlike Taylor's own emphasis on self-knowledge that offers "our sense of ourselves, our *identity*, of what we are." However, he notes that what is important in Foucault's parrhesia "is not the role the turn inward plays in shaping a larger social imaginary"—where self-discovery becomes externalized into polis—but the Nietzschean quest to allow truth to become a problem and an activity. Given the centrality of pluralism—a respectful pluralism of persons, histories, and values—that threads through Redhead's book from acknowledgements to conclusion, such perspectivalism *must* be embraced and its activity *must* be democratized. As Redhead writes, "to speak the truth of oneself involves problematizing what one has become" (223–24). Resisting the projection of that self onto politics, however, makes it possible to trace the slippage from one's own liberation to its coercive imposition on others.

Redhead thus deftly redirects the liberal demand that self and order be analogous. Yet he remains preoccupied with the performative self-contradiction that Taylor, MacIntyre, and others locate in Foucault's genealogical critique—the need to act, even as the grounds for action cannot be established with certainty and for all. Parrhesia's value might lie in its ability to work with this contradiction, and to bring doer and deed, self

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and expressive action, into a consonance and a governance quite different from existing official order.

A liberal might find this aesthetics of existence admirable, then, for its efforts to disconnect knowledge, ethics, and truth telling from institutionalized hierarchies that organize what a polis takes to be morally or politically valuable. It takes seriously the democratic promise of rooting the good life in ordinary *lives*. This challenge might be, however, slightly different from North American identity politics. In 1980, historian Maurice Agulhon wrote, "To be a liberal today, is perhaps to try to apply beneath these barriers that pedagogy in liberty that our esteemed ancestors once reserved for those above those barriers."[8] Framing questions of freedom and truth as an education for governance enables Foucault's practices of subject formation to become more than solipsism. Instead, they are sober responses to the pedagogical projects of classical liberals, and use the optic of critical theory to grapple with the power and illiberalism at the heart, potentially, of any project of political socialization or Kantian public reason. For Foucault's ethics to disrupt and dislodge existing structures of knowledge and power, it needs both democratic roots and structural effects. Sorting out *how, for whom*, and *towards what end* necessarily will vary across contexts—in no small part because such determinations must include those currently on the margins. Rather than discovering new truths about those already with access to power, Foucault urges us to change the social and political conditions of any becoming-powerful.

And so we return to the questions of discovery versus becoming, of selves and ourselves, that launched Redhead's and Taylor's readings of Foucault. Both imagine that these projects of freedom and truth telling are individually taken up and imply a politics for "us." But what if our anxieties—our near hysterical, repetitious requests for examples, for conditions, for categorical distinctions—belie that these projects are not, *cannot* be, projects taken up in isolation? What if these anxieties are symptoms of the evacuation of social trust from human relations, such that we rely on substitutes for trust when experimenting with who to be and how to act?

One might push Redhead's invocation of Nietzsche yet further, to reveal an oversight at the heart of many liberal readings of Foucault: namely, that Foucault's efforts to back away from prescription are not deliberate efforts to be obtuse or irresponsible, or to cover up his own ignorance. Instead, the demands for prediction and prescription broached in the previous section reveal an anxious desire for constancy in our political relations with others. These anxieties suggest that we late moderns of the West have come to sense that our substantive relations of trust—relations at the heart of liberal

[8]Maurice Agulhon, "Postface," *L'impossible prison* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1980), 315.

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politics[9]—no longer thicken the relations of community and serve as guides rather than rules. One might further suggest that as these relations have been attenuated, they have been substituted with relations of risk management that are designed to minimize the frictions or even the possibility of moral and political incommensurability that so consumed Foucault and Nietzsche before him. Considered thus, Foucault's preoccupation with commensurability is no longer a matter of philosophic taste, but the acknowledgement that the inwardness once associated in the West with Christianity has paled and thinned.

Nietzsche tells the story of trust's demise through the parable of the lambs and the bird of prey, a parable that opens up the challenge of self-restraint in the face of power or morality. To sustain this self-restraint, humans "had to breed an animal with the right to make promises" and so to make men "like, regular and consequently calculable" (*GM 2*, §2). Although Nietzsche here is often glossed simply as being "antireason," this new form of promising profoundly rewrites social relations. The second-order values that sustain trust—e.g., generosity, solidarity—gradually fall to the side as their presence and merit are not easily measured. Nietzsche thus suggests that calculation (and its cousin, prescription) has prompted us to narrow our social relations and to evaluate our relations to others on increasingly instrumental terms. Liberals are not unaware of the dangers of such reductivism, and have variously sought ways to thicken the relations of trust that ought to bind and enrich a community: Lockean labor is also a moral labor on one's relation to the divine, Rousseau's education seeks to blunt the inclination to map differences onto hierarchy, Tocqueville charts the local interactions that build rather than evacuate community. But each of these paradigms relies on its own exclusions—Locke's figure of the Thief, Rousseau's seduction of women into gendered political roles, the rambunctious Jacksonian misfit.

The challenge of exclusions in a plural world, then, might be more than the challenge of "reasoning through baggage" or promoting "the mindset [of] Rawlsian public reason" (247). It might cut to the social context for reason, and the substitution of a particular kind of reason (predictable, instrumental, distant from social others) for a full-throated becoming. Foucault's turn to parrhesiastic practices thus becomes more than Redhead's skeptical self-knowledge. Perspectivism does not urge disembodiment; it teaches us to attend to the social relations that hold particular vantage points in place, and render "public reason" a political tool rather than an ethical end. A relational practice, parrhesia obliges persons to define and defend themselves in relation to others—to be consciously and constantly aware of the social

[9]Two very different works make this same point: John Dunn, "'Trust' in the Politics of John Locke," in *Rethinking Modern Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Kirstie McClure, *Judging Rights: Lockean Politics and the Limits of Consent* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

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backdrop that enables us to be, counterintuitively, "subjects and authors" of the discourses that are the weft and weave of our present.

And so Redhead is correct when he writes that parrhesia does not offer a panacea to the "reasoning with baggage" identified by other liberals. The parrhesiastic individual is unrepentantly discontinuous, her contours shade across social relations, and Foucault continues to insist that she declare her own table of values. Foucault's contribution to debates about freedom and truth telling lies elsewhere. Foucault teaches that the challenges of our politics may be less about criteria than about the ever more urgent task of building social relations of trust in a pluralist world. For all that Foucault's parrhesia, with its language of risk and critique, seems at odds with this project, this language is remarkably ill understood. "Risk" here does not return to probabilistic wagers that Nietzsche so critiques; nor is risk unreflexively and positively valorized in the form of agonistic contest. Instead, risk indexes the perils in building relations of trust, and overcoming these risks (of disavowal, misrecognition, exclusion, cruel hierarchy) cultivates an appreciation for certain kinds of trust as necessary to riding out the zeniths and nadirs of politics. Moreover, Foucault's parrhesia sets its practitioners the challenge of determining whether, how, when, and with whom to extend these relations—and when to be chary that they reinforce the parochialism of dominant cultures.

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