Foucault and Absolute Power
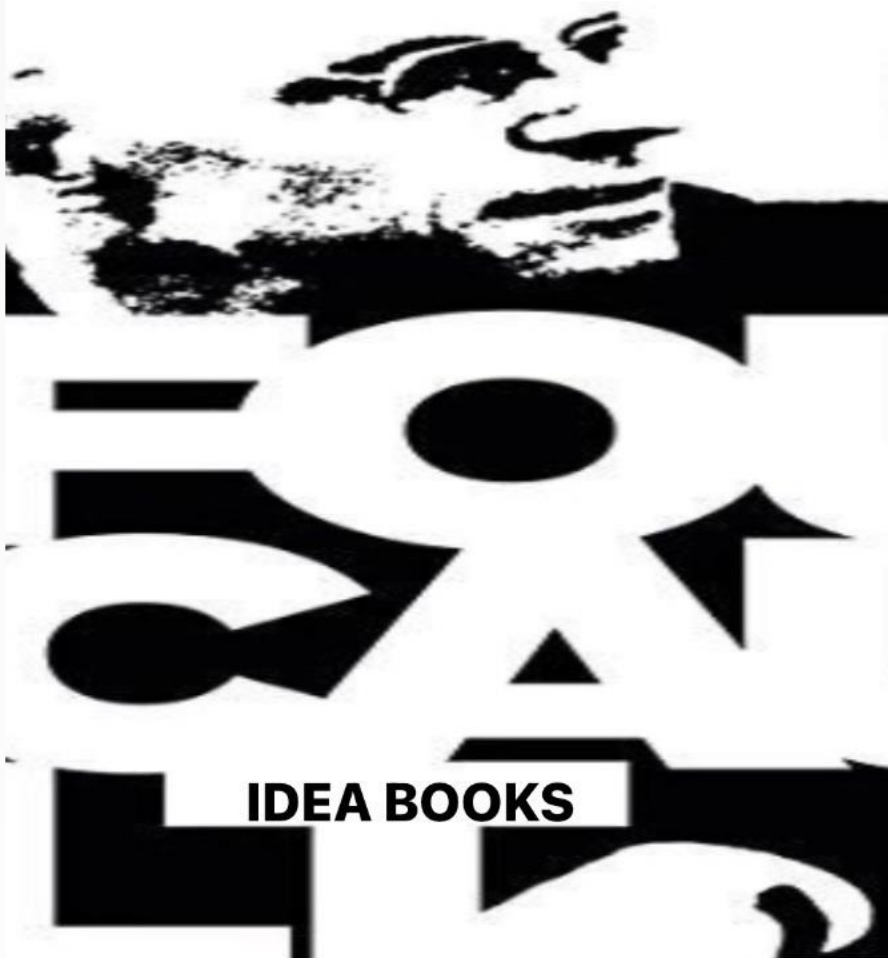
Irfan Ajvazi

IDEA BOOKS

Chapter 1. Foucault and Nietzsche

Foucault actually explicitly stated he was a follower of Nietzsche: "I am simply a Nietzschean, and I try to see, on a number of points, and to the extent that it is possible, with the aid of Nietzsche's text -- but also with anti-Nietzschean theses (which are the nevertheless Nietzschean!) -- what can be done in this or that domain. I'm not looking for anything else but I'm really searching for that".

But thought Foucault considered himself thoroughly Nietzschean, most would argue that there is quite a bit of Heidegger in his work and that he was at least greatly influenced by his interactions with post-structuralism, if not an explicitly post-structuralist thinker. As far as the postmodernism connection goes, you've definitely picked up on a major thread of postmodernism. I've had many professors go so far as to call postmodernism "Neo- Nietzscheanism." I strongly disagree, actually. There's no doubt that Nietzsche is a big influence on a lot of postmodernist thinkers. But what you'll find is that the Nietzsche talked about in postmodernism is different than the Nietzsche talked about in Virtue Ethics and Existentialism. What all three readings seem to have in common is that they are reading their own philosophical framework into Nietzsche's writings. The pictures that arise from these readings very often contradict each other and, in my opinion, don't seem to have much respect for the actual text. They're more interested in what they think they can get away with pretending it says.

There are certainly some elements of Nietzsche in postmodernism. But I think Nietzsche would be very much against the messages of acceptance and pluralism. People often like to argue that Nietzsche was a pluralist because he rejected the implicit universality thesis in "herd morality," as he would call it. But Nietzsche was very much a fan of Master and Slave moralities. Nietzsche saw us all as being determined by facts about us. Some of us have the ability to do great things and be masters, but are held down by the herd morality that teaches us that anything that puts us above our neighbors is sin. Nietzsche sees this herd morality as the slaves convincing the masters that their weaknesses are virtues. Nietzsche's all about the higher men having freedom from the herd morality.

But then there is also another way in which the word "truth" comes up in Nietzsche's writings. This is the way in which he sees people (he especially accused Socrates of this) claiming to be pursuing truth when they are actually making a false interpretation of the world (and making this claim seems to necessarily presuppose the existence of truth and falsity). This pursuit of truth is

more like metaphysics. Nietzsche sees a lot of such so-called "truth" as really just being interpretation--the prejudice of our own reason projecting itself onto the world and projecting on it our own mental order and reason, until the text finally disappears under the interpretation (prejudice of reason stuff is Twilight of Idols and texts disappearing under interpretation is BGE... I kind of mashed them together). Truth in this pejorative sense is very much a common gripe of Nietzsche. And it leads some to believe that he believes there is no such thing as truth. I don't see that reading as particularly supportable. It doesn't make sense for him to say that the order of our morality is carried in our own individual physiology if there is nothing true about our own individual physiologies.

But then there is also another way in which the word "truth" comes up in Nietzsche's writings. This is the way in which he sees people (he especially accused Socrates of this) claiming to be pursuing truth when they are actually making a false interpretation of the world (and making this claim seems to necessarily presuppose the existence of truth and falsity). This pursuit of truth is more like metaphysics. Nietzsche sees a lot of such so-called "truth" as really just being interpretation--the prejudice of our own reason projecting itself onto the world and projecting on it our own mental order and reason, until the text finally disappears under the interpretation (prejudice of reason stuff is Twilight of Idols and texts disappearing under interpretation is BGE... I kind of mashed them together). Truth in this pejorative sense is very much a common gripe of Nietzsche. And it leads some to believe that he believes there is no such thing as truth. I don't see that reading as particularly supportable. It doesn't make sense for him to say that the order of our morality is carried in our own individual physiology if there is nothing true about our own individual physiologies.

So, to recap my position: Truth in the pejorative, metaphysical sense is condemned by Nietzsche. Truth has no intrinsic value, because nothing has intrinsic value. Nietzsche's entire corpus seems incomprehensible if he doesn't believe that truth does exist (even the two above claims). It seems that Nietzsche's extrinsic evaluation of empirical truths is that they had some merit, as they inform much of what he says in his work. The more of a system involved and the more off of the text interpretation required, the more susceptible we are of having the text (or empirical truths about the world) disappear under our interpretations.

Nietzsche seems, in my opinion, to hold a localized vision of truth which is analogous to Wittgensteinian language games and Foucaultian statements, if with a less exact meaning. I think there's textual evidence throughout Nietzsche's works. I'm going to list a series of objections which either take the form of textual encounters or answers to some of your positions. I'm sorry this isn't more organized, 1. In The Birth of Tragedy Nietzsche distinguishes between an

3

Apollonian view and a Socratic view. Kaufmann in his analysis says that Nietzsche, if anything, prefers Apollo to Dionysus and his later Dionysus refers to the two in combination. Kaufmann, in short, thinks that Apollo and rigorous truth-seeking ("fanatical" is his term) are equivalent. However, Nietzsche contrasts the form- bringing nature of Apollo (remember, he compares the Apollonian impulse to sculpture, to bring form) to the truth revealing Socratic impulse. It is obvious that he prefers the former, which seems rather to lend itself to a constructivist interpretation of Nietzsche.

I think that is an unfair way of stating what Foucault- he didn't apply Nietzsche ideas to various fields, but institutions in general nilly-willy. Nietzsches argument regarding institution's control over individuals is never really fleshed out- What about the church I hear you ask? The way Nietzsche describes the birth of the church in the genealogy portrays priests as clever men who seduce the lower man with a silver tongue and promises of greatness in the next world and those who are sinful (and powerful, in Nietzschean terms) will suffer eternal damnation. The priests themselves are lured to religion via the psychological affects of ascetic ideals. (yes, this is very bare bones, description). Nietzsche's description dosen't necessarily take a realistic approach to history, but perhaps, provides a way in which we have come to think about power the way that we do.

Foucault takes Neitzsche's abstract idea of insitutions affecting individual, and provides a more concrete example how institutions hold are built by us, and yet, retain power over us. Nietzsche may have been the catalyst, but I believe that Foucault did all the heavy lifting in his attempt to show that Institutions have control, control that is independent of any human intervention, over people- despite being created by people. This is a complex idea that Nietzsche dosen't begin to adress.

Chapter 2. Foucault's Discourse

In short, Foucault's view of discourse mostly centers around the relationship between power and knowledge. His concern wasn't really "what is said"/"what is true?" but ″what can we say?" or "which truth is relevant in this context?" Put another way, the question can be phrased as "what is

it possible to say/know?" The answer to the question is complicated depending on what system you're working in, but Foucault's central argument is that what's possible to say is constrained by relations of power. Power isn't just held by the "powerful"; the key term here is relation of power. Power is not a thing you have, but a relationship structured by history, context, politics, ideas, etc. This is the bit that gets Foucault pegged as a radical social constructionist, imo. Power and knowledge are intertwined with one another - one follows the other. Power relies on knowledge to function; however, power also tends to reproduce knowledges that are best suited for its intentions. (Intentions is a bad word, here - this kind of power is not really held by any one person or even an institution, it's far more diffuse than that. But we'll stick with intentions for now). A good example of this playing out in analysis is his text Birth of the Clinic.

Power and knowledge are intertwined with one another - one follows the other. Power relies on knowledge to function; however, power also tends to reproduce knowledges that are best suited for its intentions. (Intentions is a bad word, here - this kind of power is not really held by any one person or even an institution, it's far more diffuse than that. But we'll stick with intentions for now). A good example of this playing out in analysis is his text Birth of the Clinic. Now, to your specific question: a discourse is a field of various power-knowledges, relations of power, etc that operate via certain exclusions. A discourse is a grouping or network of objects, ideas, places, people, histories that limit who can say what, where they can say it, and how they can say it. It's important to understand power and knowledge as distinct concepts so you can understand how they structure various discourses.

Chapter 3. The Definition of Resistance

I'm specifically wondering about his arguments in The History of Sexuality, in which he writes: "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (1978:95-96).

My understanding of Foucault's notion of resistance is that it exists within the power relations

that you are resisting against. So in this instance, I understand the quote to mean that any resistance stems from the power relations you find yourself within, not from an external source. That's why Foucault advocates heavily on criticality and reflecting on one's own experiences to see the power relations and subjectivities that we are subjected to, so that we might become aware of ways in which it might be possible to think differently and live differently.

Power relations only exist between free subjects. Freedom can only be exercised in a power relation. There is no escaping from power relations. Every subject is always a part of many different power relations. That's why power is everywhere. Resistance is enacting ones own freedom in a specific power relation to change the relationship. This enacting upon a relation can always cause an reaction from the opposing side.

Thus, Foucault's conception of freedom is not that of an end-point of release/liberation but an ongoing process of critique and refusal - everday resistance of everday power. This aso means that instead of merely asking 'Are we free?', we should be asking 'How are we constrained and what might we do about it?'.

It means resistance does not come as an external push against power but is borne from within network power relations - it is an outward push that originates inside power relations. Not like a collision between two distinct objects.

Chapter 4. Foucault's Power Relations

Foucault wanted to replace that with a distributed image of power. Power isn't something that happens to people, it's something that happens between people. Power relations exist everywhere in society, and the people who are being oppressed by power are just as much participants as those who are doing the oppressing. The standard way of illustrating this is the famous Panopticon. The prisoners isolated in their cells become part of the apparatus of power, monitoring themselves, internalizing the power relations in which they are embedded. Foucault writes, "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection"

And this is how his notion of power relations hooks into the body-politics that he writes so much about. Power-relations can become literally inscribed in our bodies. If the Catholic church can convince you that pooping is immoral, they've taken something your body does and embedded it in a set of power-relations, between you and the priesthood, for example. In a sense, your body colludes in your oppression. That is the general form of power for Foucault - it comes from within you as much as it happens to you from without. It's the relation that is primary, which allows power to be this diffuse, distributed, right-in- front-of-you-but-invisible thing.

Foucault's euvre is very complex, and you can easily get lost. Knowing the rough periodization based on major works helps though. Can we really say that the central tower asserts power over an inmate who is certain that it does not? We can say that when it doesn't really matter what the inmate thinks, i.e. all the time in a prison setting. And his behaviour is suddenly being sanctioned, sooner or later. Again, the wording about "the tower asserting power" would be quite sloppy and not exactly in line with what Foucault is doing in the book.

The whole point of the Panopticon is that the prisoner knows/thinks they are being watched. It's meant to illustrate the ways in which knowledge and power interact. If there is no knowledge, then clearly this interaction can't happen. He wouldn't deny, certainly, that people can be manipulated without their knowledge. But the form of power he was interested in is the manifest kind, the kind that comes with all of the discourses that we participate in all the time. Foucault thinks that is by far the more important means of control in our society.

Chapter 5. Foucault and Neoliberalism

Foucault is right. Neoliberalism has offered the most freedom for human self actualisation in history because the market is a kind of distributed democracy that reduces all values to money. "I don't care what you are or what you believe as long as you pay for it."

Chapter 6. Foucault's Theories

Foucault's theories were used by the left-wing and ignored by the right-wing, which I think is unfortunate. For example, Foucault correctly figured out that control of sexuality gives power. He believed that in the 19th century, religion had this power but that when sexuality was "freed" by psychoanalysts, it was psychoanalysts who took control over sexuality. Instead of people feeling they had to repress their sexuality and going to those who had that power (such as

priests), they now believed they had to release their sexuality and went to those who allegedly were capable of doing this.

Power can be used to control and define knowledge. Academic communities exercise implicit control over subjects by defining the scope of what people ought to accept as true. Certain fields of study may wield their influence to exclude or preclude ideas they do not like despite their "truthiness". These communities are best understood as categories of knowledge. The example that Foucault discusses at length in The History of Madness is the way in which public institutions use mental illness (category) to define and control the mentally ill, the sick, and the homeless. Foucault generally believes that these kinds of distinctions are harmful because they equate to oppression. He argued that society uses the term "madness" to restrict individual freedom and creativity that may otherwise threaten the structure of society.

These communities are best understood as categories of knowledge. The example that Foucault discusses at length in The History of Madness is the way in which public institutions use mental illness (category) to define and control the mentally ill, the sick, and the homeless. Foucault generally believes that these kinds of distinctions are harmful because they equate to oppression. He argued that society uses the term "madness" to restrict individual freedom and creativity that may otherwise threaten the structure of society. This is an important aspect of power because it extends to any kind of truth. One's perspective is entirely dependent on the truth, but one also has very little influence over what is true, and has very little recourse in re-evaluating what is true. Put simply, one acquires what is true, and many tend to believe it without question for fear of punishment.

Chapter 7. Defining Others

The power relations we exist in at a certain time will have an effect on the things one can see and say, or what knowledge one can produce at that moment; we are 'disposed' to certain actions by a dispositif. When we define the other in a definitive way (Foucault asks us not to expect him, or anyone, to remain the same) we are sedimenting an order of discourse. Perhaps one must instead 'fictionalize', eventualize, and problematize the other, as these verbs which Foucault offers remain 'open to becoming', to use Bakhtin's words. Quite late in his life Foucault begins speaking of parrhesia, which can be described in the following ways: speaking the truth even while in risk of danger and among enemies speaking one's truth without trying to persuade or flatter speaking without holding back

As for the rest of your questions, Foucault states that there are struggles for a new subjectivity that have to do with 'refuting what we' are according to the state or modern civil society, which has both individualizing and totalizing aspects. He describes these struggles as 'popular illegalism' and 'resistance and attempts at dissociation' from sedimented power configurations and orders of discourse; he gives examples such as in women, children, the insane, the sick, the sinful, etc. and he describes these struggles as transversal, connected accross the globe at a local level critiquing the effects of power immediate: critiquing the closest instances of power without a hope for a final resolution • questioning the status of the individual attack forms and techniques of power ask who we are in an anti-abstractive way

The integration and 'vectorization' of pastoral power into our modern 'government' can be described in the following way: • ensuring salvation now: health, welfare increasing pastoral power into new disciplines • police, hospitals, philanthropists, schools has both totalizing and individualizing strategies • globalizing and quatitative (populations) · anaylitical (individual truth) With this layout of pastoral power Foucault, as many know, calls for us to be 'kantian' in the following way: connect philosophy to both metaphysics and the 'current historical events' unfolding ask what is going on just now, 'what are we in this very precise moment of history' • refuse what we are get rid of this 'political double bind' of individualization and totalization and 'promote new forms of subjectivity'

Chapter 8. Foucault and multiplicity

Taking a shot at a response here. Foucault often assigns multiple meanings/functions to discourses and/or institutions. He does so to try to capture the multiplicity of those things, meaning their variable meanings and functions. For example Security, Territory, and Population can each be understood-in very different ways- as simultaneously an object and target of governance. What does that mean? It means that government takes a Territory as one of the things it attempts to manage (target); and simultaneously, government happens through the social/institutional conjuring of that thing (object) labeled "Territory." Population can be thought about pretty similarly.

From my understanding, Foucault contrasts multiplicity with multitude. So the latter consists of an unorganised milieu i.e. a crowd, mob, riot, etc. Multiplicity is the organisation and

hierarchisation of these milieu into taxonomies with distinctions that limits the freedom they have to become an unorganised and anonymous multitude. This is what he drives at in Discipline and Punish.

Chapter 9. Biopower and governmentality

Biopower is a type of power that takes as its object bio- elements ie bodies and populations. It is a power-relation that produces effects at the level of the body or the population (omnes et singulatum) Governmentality is not a type of "power" but a rationality or "art of government". Governmentality is thus more of a rationality of mode of knowledge that might use bio-power as one of its instruments.

Secondly: Biopower is a tendency within early late 19th and early 20th century governmentality, one where discipline shifts towards (ta daa) the body and questions of rights, life and death. This kinda dies out after WII and governmentality becomes something more directed towards security. However, an argument can be made that biopower has shifted towards human capital instead (ie. that human capital is a developed form of biopower, one that is in alignment with security).

The problem with relating the ideas of Biopower and governmentality is that Foucault's definitions are fluid. Biopower can mean the governmental focus on life/death politics. Biopower can also mean the political power inherent to those life forces. Governmentality refers to how governments seek to inculcate individuals with systems of knowledge that frame them as rightly-governed/governable subjects. It also refers to the mentality of the governed/governable.

Chapter 10. The Origin of Power

Hm, as such there is no origin of power, power is not something that actually exists, it's "only" an empty concept, just like biopolitics or epistemes. In that sense, Foucault is not concerned with the origins of power as such, but the practice and how origins of power are understood within these practices. As such, what he does is to ask "insofar as power exists, how is it practiced?" You can, however, find certain hints to his inspirations. An important thing to have in mind though, is that he never exclusively deals with power. It is always a part of his analytical framework (in early works power, then later normativity). For this analytical framework Plato and Kant are the most influential. The trinity of aletheia (truth/veridiction), politeia (power/normativity) and ethos (subjectivity/pragmatics of self) of Plato and it's correlations with Kant's

famous sentence from the first critique: "what can I know, what should I do, what can I hope for". These two are combined in his framework and shifts during his authorship, but he remains loyal to it.

In his course "On the Government of the Living" (1978-1979), which curiously occurred after Baudrillard's "Forget Foucault" (1977), he shifts from knowledge (episteme), and dogmatic/thetic power (which he shifted to due to a Nietzschean influence, among others) to processes of subjectification (truth-telling, memory testing, body training) that fold power- knowledge. He also shifts from the normation of law and pastoral power to the normalization of dispositifs and statistical analysis, and finally a genealogy of sexuality, all of which Baudrillard's "Seduction" (1979) calls for. He begins to consider language in a cuasi-nominal way, and with the help of Kant (1984) shifts further towards his concept of ethos as self-care and teaching care, eventually interpreting Socrates's death as such a teaching. "Subject and Power" (1982) summarizes and expands on this shift, though he describes dispositifs as being "d'origine différente, de localisation dispersée" a few years earlier. Note how this is not exactly skepticism or hermeneutics (as Veyne describes) but a type of play, a game with specific rules that question the necessity and universality of power. He refers to this as not archeology or genealogy, but anarchéologie, focusing on provenance and not. origine.

But this is not exactly the standpoint of, say, the epochë, of skepticism, of the suspension of all certainties or of all thetic positions of the truth. It is an attitude that consists, first, in thinking that no power goes without saying, that no power, of whatever kind, is obvious or inevitable, and that consequently no power warrants being taken for granted. Power has no intrinsic legitimacy. On the basis of this position, the approach consists in wondering, that being the case, what of the subject and relations of knowledge do we dispense with when we consider no power to be founded either by right or necessity, that all power only ever rests on the contingency and fragility of a history, that the social contract is a bluff and civil society a children's story, [and] that there is no universal, immediate, and obvious right that can everywhere and always support any kind of relation of power. Let us say that if the great philosophical approach consists in establishing a methodical doubt that suspends every certainty, the small lateral approach on the opposite track that I am proposing consists in trying to bring into play in a systematic way, not the suspension of every certainty, but the non-necessity of all power of whatever kind.

Foucault used the concepts disposition, relation, milieu, transactional realities and diffusion of apparatuses to refer to what you call "origen" and "persistance", and eventually points to the will to truth as the culprit, which he also says must be destroyed and replaced with truth creation (frank speaking) and care of self (e.g. instructio / paraskeué). Power is a field of action which

affects others' fields of actions, but which ultimately rests on us believing in a cathartic Truth.