

## ARTICLE

### **Foucault's Wake**

#### A Response to Todd May's "Foucault Now?"

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And Seneca envisages the moment of death as the moment when one will be able to become one's own judge, as it were, and able to measure the moral progress one will have made up to one's final day. In letter 26 he wrote: 'On the moral progress I have been able to make in the course of my life, I trust only in death . . . I await the day when I will pass judgment on myself and know whether virtue was only in my words or really in my heart'.<sup>1</sup>

And yet, nearly a generation after Foucault's death, we return to this thinker, this historian, this philosopher, as though he still speaks to us, as though we have not yet exhausted the meanings of his words. So, we are confronted with the question: what do we make of Foucault now? What remains for us to learn from him? What remains for us to think about and act upon in the wake of his writings?<sup>2</sup>

The first thing one might notice of Todd May's address to the inaugural conference of the Foucault Society is that its title "Foucault Now?" explicitly takes the form of a question in contrast to the exclamatory title of the conference itself: "Foucault Now!" While the conference was organized as a way to bring together and celebrate some of the diverse kinds of work, art, and play that many people engage in through their readings of Foucault, I understood May's title to be something of a cautionary gesture and reminder consisting of two interrelated concerns developed throughout the address. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is the question of Foucault's relevance for us who today are engaged in the critical work of asking about our present and ourselves – a question that should continue to be asked by each successive generation of critical thinkers, scholars and researchers. The second question, which perhaps might be given a kind of priority over the first, is to ask what it is that we "make" of Foucault. The question here is not so much

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1 Michel Foucault, "Course Summary" in Arnold I. Davidson (ed.) *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (New York: St. Martin's Press), 505.

2 Todd May, "Foucault Now?", *Foucault Studies*, no. 3 December 2005, 65.

what we can get out of him as what we do with him. Although this second question might sound like little more than a repetition of the first, I think it might go further in revealing an underlying concern with the possibility of missing something important about Foucault's life and work in the process of turning him to our own ends.

There are many of us who regularly turn to Foucault, to his writings, for all kinds of reasons and perhaps we often return with this or that preconceived understanding of how we might once again make good use of the many tools he has provided us. As has often been noted, at various times Foucault himself suggested this idea – that his books be “used” rather than read – and even invited the possibility that the tools he himself forged be somehow turned against his own writings.<sup>3</sup> But a further possibility for the experience of reading Foucault is to allow ourselves to wonder, not so much what we can make of the works he has left us, but what it is that *he* might make of *us* in what remains for us. Not to bring ourselves to the point of asking this question might be to risk not making much of Foucault at all. This is what I find at the heart of May's address, a call to attend to the necessity of repeatedly asking how Foucault's writings may yet again – many years after his death – produce a disturbing wake with an overwhelming power to cut across the relatively smooth currents of our everyday lives and lead us toward ever new understandings of how the contingencies of history have “deposited us on these shores.”<sup>4</sup> My intention here is not to create a kind of binary opposition between ways of reading Foucault, some right and some wrong, nor is it to suggest that May has done so. That would be very un-Foucaultian. Rather, it seems clear to me that Foucault was interested in having people use his work in any way that they might chose to in the course of doing their own work. And it also seems clear that the question I find in May's address, of what Foucault continues to make of us, necessarily involves the use of some of the critical tools, concepts, and original sites of analysis that remain to us. Yet there are also other important registers within which a text of Foucault's can become a disturbing, disruptive, or shocking “experience book”<sup>5</sup> with the power to transform its users/readers. From the unsettling

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3 Michel Foucault, “Prisons et asiles dans le mécanisme du pouvoir” in *Dits et Ecrits*, t. II, (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 523-4.

4 May, “Foucault Now?”, 69.

5 The phrase “experience book” is Foucault's and comes from his 1978 interview with Duccio Trombadori. See Michel Foucault, “How An ‘Experience-Book’ Is Born,” in *Remarks On Marx* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991). On page 27 Foucault states: “An experience is something you come out of changed. If I had to write a book to communicate what I have already thought, I'd never have the courage to begin it. I write precisely because I don't know yet what to think about a subject that attracts my interest. In so doing, the book transforms me, changes what I think.” The French *expérience* translates to both “experience” and “experiment” in English.

laughter Foucault recalls experiencing while reading the peculiar description of a “certain Chinese encyclopedia” in a passage by Borges<sup>6</sup> to the relentlessly detailed and dizzying description of the torture and execution of Damiens, the eighteenth-century regicide,<sup>7</sup> reading Foucault can be a life-changing experience that is often as much visceral as intellectual. Within his pages, our history, our present, and ourselves are all somehow made to feel strange, uncanny, and unfamiliar to us. We suddenly find ourselves at a great distance from our surroundings, our world, and ourselves. The question we are to remind ourselves of, as a task, is: “What power can Foucault’s books have over us – to move us, to shock us, to disturb us *today*?” Near the end of his address May offered a suggestion as to how we might approach Foucault with this question in mind:

For the Greeks, and especially for Hellenistic philosophy, the point of a philosophical text or a teaching was not to offer more knowledgeableness but to orient one toward a way of living. As such, one returned to those texts or those teachings not because a nuance of thought had been forgotten or an inference not well understood, but because one needed to be reminded of who one was and what one might become.<sup>8</sup>

We are to consider the idea that perhaps we should not return to Foucault’s writings always and only in the interest of research and scholarship and as a purely academic pursuit, but rather we should be vigilant in taking his words to heart as a kind of ethical exercise, as Foucault himself did in the ever-changing development of his own life. What we are being asked to do – the task before us – is attend to Foucault’s writings as a kind of “spiritual exercise” while bearing in mind that he too made use of his writings in order to produce a transformative experience in himself. What we so often forget, May believes, is that our history is contingent and therefore so too are we. He reminds us that taking history seriously and taking ourselves seriously as historical beings necessitate a careful and patient recognition of ourselves as contingent beings. What cannot be forgotten is the critical link between our history understood in terms of rupture, event, and discontinuity, and the fragile nature of who and what we have become today. We attend to history not simply in order to wonder about the possibility that things might have happened otherwise but, as May suggests, “we . . . might have happened differently as well.” Within the fragility of our present lay the possibilities for our future. That, and nothing else, he tells us, is “our nature and our hope.”

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6 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, Random House, 1970), xv.

7 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1979), 3-6.

8 May, “Foucault Now?” 76.

Foucault makes us realize that adopting a critical attitude toward the present, toward contemporary society, necessitates in turn a critical attitude towards ourselves. A “gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary” analysis of the present requires that we be attentive to what Nietzsche called “the little things” of our lives – the specific knowledges and practices that inform our everyday lives.<sup>9</sup> As May puts it:

We must do the spade work of investigating the unfolding history of the world we have received. We must look where historians often forget to look and where philosophers always fear to tread: on the ground, in the spaces where people live their lives.<sup>10</sup>

Where other critical descriptions of our present tend to fail us is in their apparent tendency to be seduced by what Michel de Certeau describes as the “voluptuous pleasure” derived from “seeing the whole” as if one were “looking down like a god.” This pretense of viewing the world “from on high”<sup>11</sup> is something May finds exemplified in Baudrillard, Deleuze, and contemporary studies of globalization. This is not, I hope, to make the polemical claim that Foucault is correct and the others are wrong. Rather, it is to note that there is not enough for us to work with in these political critiques that tend to leave out the ethical elements that Foucault understood must always be thought together with politics if we are to begin to understand our own present possibilities for the future. Such works as Deleuze’s and Baudrillard’s might move us and provoke us in certain ways, but perhaps only towards another position of stasis.

As one example of how we might begin to answer the question of “Foucault Now?” May suggests we ask about the role of sexuality in constituting our lives over the thirty years that have passed since Foucault’s publication of volume one of *The History of Sexuality*. He notes that today there is much less talk of sexual liberation than there was when Foucault was writing. Yet if we are to begin to develop a serious answer to the question concerning sexuality we must begin by looking closely and patiently at health and self-help manuals, religious sermons, popular cultural forms such as film and music, and the debates over gay marriage, abortion, and pornography. As he begins to approach his conclusion May asks: “What does this mean for who we are now?” and in response he claims: “Although I do not have an answer for this, I suspect that, globalization aside, it is not entirely

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9 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, Walter Kaufmann (ed.), (New York: Random House, 1967), 256

10 May, “Foucault Now?” 75.

11 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press), 92.

irrelevant."<sup>12</sup> Here, however, I find myself pausing with some concern over this passing phrase: "globalization aside." While I hope that I have adequately appreciated May's emphasis on the need to be more genealogical in our use of Foucault and the importance of leaving ourselves open to the possibility of our having transformative experiences when reading him, I cannot help but wonder if he has not gone too far in making his point and lost sight of some of the real possibilities remaining to us in terms such as "globalization" or concepts like Deleuze's "control society."

Returning to this question of sexuality and what role it has played in constituting our lives over the years since Foucault's death, I cannot help but make note of a puzzling omission in May's admittedly brief discussion of sexuality. There is no mention of HIV/AIDS. In the twenty plus years since Foucault's death from AIDS a great deal has changed in our thinking, practices, and discussions about sex and sexuality, much of it because of this ongoing pandemic which has had and continues to have truly *global* ramifications. My sense is that a significant part of our updated "history of sexuality" would be incomplete without including detailed descriptions of such various global factors as the chronic unavailability of affordable HIV drugs for many populations resulting from the concern for profits of multinational pharmaceutical corporations, the promotion of a dangerous morality through the United States government's insistence upon emphasizing abstinence over contraception as a condition for giving international aid, the spread of HIV through international sex tourism, and the overall evolving demographics of the AIDS pandemic in Africa and Asia. Indeed, it is likely that without the steady increase in global air travel, the worldwide spread of HIV could never have developed to the extent and at the rate that it has in many populations. Of course these global factors (economic, political, and technological) would have to be included alongside and in conjunction with more "local" analyses. For example, our descriptions would also attend to how various different groups and communities (e.g., sexual, gender, age, economic, racial, ethnic, and religious) have responded to and been affected by HIV/AIDS.

My suspicion is that, while May is right to strategically re-emphasize the importance of doing the difficult and detailed "spade work" in the critical work that we do, we should perhaps also be equally cautious about how and when we put aside broader concepts and descriptions that otherwise seem unwieldy and totalizing. As May puts it himself, the problem is that "Deleuze and Baudrillard and those who cast our world in terms of globalization tell us something, but they do not tell us enough." Perhaps what is required, then, is not that we put these discussions to the side, but that we do the difficult work to make them more genealogical, more Foucaultian, and thereby view them

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12 May, "Foucault Now?" 75.

from the ground up rather than use them to produce, as de Certeau puts it, a gaze “from on high.”