

Five more pieces on Foucault

258. System power and self-indoctrination

published 23-4-2016

In the preceding item in this blog I discussed a position of liberal communitarianism, where I recognized the problem of getting imprisoned by indoctrination in a community.

Foucault opened my eyes to how institutional environments (prisons, medical clinics, insane asylums) and social arrangements (sexuality, scientific disciplines) can condition those involved to take for granted what happens, to accept what goes on as normal or even the way it should be, even if they are in fact victims of it. I mentioned this earlier in this blog, in items 50, 159, and 244. In his later philosophy, Foucault moved from coercive arrangements to ways of forming oneself. There, he seemed to move from a system perspective to a perspective of bilateral interaction between individuals. Towards the end of his life Foucault offered the notion of 'shaping one's life as a work of art'.

How can one escape from institutional power? In item 244 I offered a linguistic analysis, connecting with Žižek's analysis of the 'symbolic order'. Here I take an approach from my analysis of cognitive development as a construction of mental structures by assimilation and accommodation.

Institutional power arises more widely than in the more or less closed and coercive environments discussed by Foucault, in what earlier in this blog I called 'system tragedy'. I used the case of banking as an example. Not only people who suffer from perverse institutional power but also those who implement it or direct it are caught in the system, against their preference or conscience, in 'prisoner's dilemma's'.

In some of the environments studied by Foucault people are more or less locked in, with little or no alternative (prisons, asylums). Elsewhere (scientific communities, banks) the lock-in is more voluntary. In all cases, what seems to be going on is something like self-indoctrination. It is not so much that people are told or pressured to think in a certain way but develop it themselves by assimilating the practice in which they live, and accommodating to it. Cognitive dissonance may also play a role: blinding oneself to the negative not to feel guilty about accommodating.

What way out? In his discussion of 'technologies of the self', Foucault recognized that in human relations power is inevitable and can be positive, in creating options and opportunities, but one should avoid the negative power of domination, coercion, in both the submission to it and the practice of it, taking freedom for counter-power or exit. From the present perspective of self-indoctrination in a social system, I would add that one should always maintain windows on outside views and practices, as a source of variety, an opportunity to differ from inside doctrine, a basis for saying 'no' to the system.

For bankers that should be relatively easy: listen to your customers and to criticism from society. For inmates of prisons or asylums it is a different story. I wonder: could the function of gang formation and mutual violence in prisons be their way of saying no, of maintaining some basis of their own for escaping full accommodation to the system?

And what about practices on the internet? It appears that people voluntarily lock themselves up in virtual communities of agreement, even on the most absurd, fabricated claims to truth,

thus shielding themselves from disagreement, from saying ‘no’, thus indoctrinating themselves and robbing themselves of sources of authenticity.

Refusing to be locked up in the closure of a community requires an act of social or civic courage, with the risk of losing social legitimacy and getting isolated and ostracised, becoming an outsider. But there is a compensating joy at crafting authenticity, taking responsibility for developing one’s self. Indeed, perhaps like creating one’s life as a work of art, as Foucault said.

259. Voice and parrhêsia

published 30-4-2016

In this blog, I have used the notion of *voice*, proposed by Albert Hirschman, in a discussion of the practical wisdom of trust. Here I make a connection with the notion of *parrhêsia*, discussed by Michel Foucault in his late work (in the form of lectures at the *Collège de France*, in 1984).

Parrhêsia is a form of truth telling, different from other forms, such as confession, prophecy, teaching, reporting, scientific and philosophical discourse. Those forms mostly entail technical or factual matters (*techne*, in ancient Greek), and they are mostly one-directional, keeping distance, staying aloof.

Parrhêsia, by contrast, is a matter of morality (*ethos*), requires commitment, and is bilateral, interactive. It accepts the uncertainty of what one effects in the other, and of his/her response. In being honest, it puts the relation at risk, the risk of a break, or of a defensive, aggressive response, or *exit*, to adopt that other notion from Albert Hirschman. Hence, it requires courage.

This makes it very much like *voice*, if not identical. Perhaps the notion of *parrhêsia* deepens the notion of *voice*. But also the other way around: *voice* complements *parrhêsia*.

Voice/parrhêsia is a form of benevolence and requires benevolence also on the part of the interlocutor, to be open to criticism, extending benefit of the doubt rather than jumping to conclusions and falling into suspicion when meeting opposition, or running away from it.

In other words, voice/parrhêsia requires trust and reciprocity in openness and benevolence. Trust is a condition for it as well an outcome of it. When voice meets voice it deepens.

I propose that it does not entail ‘telling it all’, as Foucault suggested. Trust should not be blind and openness has its limits, to limit relational risk, for oneself and the other, and not to overtax the absorptive capacity and benevolence of the interlocutor, and indeed also one’s own. It is fragile and requires care.

Foucault also discusses the extreme form of cynicism, in the classical sense, of a brutal, offensive, uncompromising telling of stark, naked truth, often combined with an exhibitionist renunciation of worldly goods. If that is a form of voice, it is an exit form of it.

260. What is an intellectual?

published 7-5-2016

In item 218 of this blog I used a definition of the intellectual from Foucaultⁱ: ‘The person who uses his knowledge, his competence, and his relation to truth in the field of political struggles’. Elsewhere, I found a similar definitionⁱⁱ: ‘... engagement in public life, in the service of a cause that divides politicians, elites and simple citizens’.

The paradigmatic case is that of Emile Zola, with his ‘I accuse’, in the upheaval in France with the affair Dreyfus. Another is that of Sartre. The notion of a public intellectual seems especially French.

This leaves room for a wide variety of intellectualsⁱⁱⁱ: of the left, the right, progressive and conservative, of humanism (Thomas Mann was mentioned, but there was doubt whether he might be too a-political), and even of Nazism (Heidegger). Some defend universal values, such as freedom (Sartre), while others (Foucault) militate against universals in defence of particulars. One may even be an intellectual at arms against any hegemony of intellectuals.

While Foucault pleaded for the intellectual as an expert in some area, Sartre proposed that the intellectual begins where the ‘technician of practical knowledge ends’.^{iv}

An important feature is independence, if not autonomy. In item 218 I discussed how difficult it may be to maintain it.

Connected to that, and connecting with Bergson and Derrida, as in preceding items of this blog, I add what I think is a central feature: the intellectual is engaged in Bergsonian ‘duration’ and Derridaist ‘deconstruction’. This elaborates on the idea that the mission of the intellectual is to break dogma and shift established, taken for granted beliefs or perspectives.

Even deconstruction may be deconstructed. As I argued in item 251, the change, transformation involved in duration and deconstruction cannot be without pause. Some stability is required, and it is part of the task of intellectuals to bring it about, in diffusing, explaining and defending perspectives.

Max Weber distinguished between a ‘morality of conviction’ and a ‘morality of responsibility’. The first may be obvious, but is the latter a requirement for an intellectual? And is the criterion for responsibility then feasibility of the views expressed? I am inclined towards responsibility, but I grant that feasibility may lock one up in the status quo.

While feasibility and stability may be virtues, it is a challenge not to be co-opted in dominant perspectives, as I argued in item 218. The intellectual must have the courage to maintain independence even at the cost of being ignored, ostracized or persecuted. That is easier said than done. Nazism denounced intellectuals as enemies of the state, forcing them to either conform (Heidegger) or to emigrate, either in reality or virtually, in ‘inner emigration’.

But often, in liberal democracies the price intellectuals pay is bearable, with a little courage. It can help to congregate in societies of their own. Yet, one may ask how many exercise such criticism, at universities, academies of science, and editorships of scholarly journals.

To use other terminology from Foucault: the intellectual engages in *parrhêsia*, or should do so, taking risks in engagement, being committed rather than maintaining the aloofness of a philosopher, teacher or scientist. The art of it then is to nevertheless maintain the telling of

truth, or the search for truth, in the form of warranted assertibility, and not fall into rhetoric to mould assent.

261. The truth of Foucault

published 14-5-2016

Foucault tugged at the notion of truth in several ways. In his earlier work on power embodied in social systems (prisons, clinics, asylums, ..) he proposed that those constitute ‘regimes of truth’ that ‘make something that does not exist able to become something’, such as notions of insanity or illness. ‘They are things that do not exist and yet which are inscribed in reality under a regime of truth dividing the true and the false’. Such a regime ‘.. is not an illusion, since it is precisely a set of practices, which established it and thus imperiously marks it out in reality’^v How, I now ask, are we to understand things that ‘do not exist yet are inscribed in reality’?

In this blog I proposed the notion that abstract, theoretical notions, such as madness and illness, and happiness, justice, and meaning, are subject to an ‘object bias’ (see item 29 of this blog). They are conceived of like objects in time and space, while in fact in important ways are not like objects at all. In that sense they are not real, but they are real in their consequences of being accepted and enacted. Is that how we might understand ‘inscription in reality’?

In this blog I adopted the notion of truth as ‘warranted assertibility’ (item 104), as supporting argument with warrants of purported facts, logic, and tested theory.

In his later work, Foucault turned from systems of power, regimes of truth, to the construction of the subject, the self, that is entangled in such regimes. He rejects Platonic notions of truth in terms of contemplating ideal, universal eternal concepts in another world, removed from the empirical world we live in. He also turns away from truth as identity ($x = y$), or as correspondence with something in reality, towards a view of *praxis*, action in this world, which is a view of difference and development, not of identity, universality and constancy. It is not oriented towards another world but to another life in this one.

That, I propose, is close to the dynamic, pragmatist stance (items 26, 108), ‘philosophy and imperfection on the move’, that I have taken throughout this blog, building on the work of the American pragmatist philosophers (Peirce, Dewey, James), and the practical wisdom of Aristotle.

The classical Greek ‘taking care of the self’ that Foucault adopted is not aimed at discovery of one’s soul but at the aesthetics of existence, life as a work of art, plus a truthful accounting for one’s conduct, in *parrhêsia*, being truthful. It works with anecdotes, narratives and exemplars rather than theory and analysis.

Here we have truth not in the epistemological sense, of an accounting in terms of logic or facts, also not in the sense of warranted assertibility, but in the sense of talking about a ‘true human being’, or ‘true hero’, or true ‘love’ or ‘friendship’. It is not the truth of science but of conduct, not of knowledge but of ethic, in what I called ‘debatable ethics’.

Foucault recognized four dimensions of this truth:

1. Unhidden, not absconded, no occlusion, but open, revealed

2. Unadulterated, pure. In some places this becomes: independent.
3. Straight, no deviance. In some places this becomes: in accordance with nature
4. Constancy, steadfast. In some places this becomes: sovereign.

Perhaps authenticity can be clarified as ‘being true to oneself’. This, in turn, may be clarified with Foucault’s four dimensions of such truth: being open, straight, independent, and sovereign.

According to Foucault, classical Greek cynics (such as Diogenes) take this, and their truth telling, to extremes. Openness, disclosure becomes living out in public spaces, as a vagabond, exhibitionist, in squalor. Life is reduced to pure, elementary nature. Conduct is uncultured, primary, direct, without shame, confrontational, militant. The cynic is staunchly independent, sovereign, uncompromising. All this is in the service of holding up unadulterated truths to people, exposing their laziness, materialism, gluttony, hypocrisy, artificiality, slavery, bondage, ...

What to think of all his? I think it is overly pretentious, and counter-productive in part.

1. Disclosure presupposes self-knowledge and transparency, while in fact much is hidden in our subconscious.
2. Independence and sovereignty are an illusion: we need others to constitute ourselves. We need their opposition to mend our prejudices and to attain some freedom from them
3. We rarely go straight, but amble around in improvisation, bumping into errors and novel opportunities and then changing direction.

So, while the ideals of this truth are commendable, normatively laudable, worth striving for, they are hardly realistic and harbour a risk of hubris and self-delusion. My objections are the same as the ones I had against Nietzsche (item 60), in the illusion of developing oneself as a subject by oneself, overcoming oneself, like the baron of Munchausen pulling himself out of the swamp by his bootstraps.

262. Banality of evil: threat or consolation?

published 20-5-2016

This is the last item of a series inspired by the work of Michel Foucault. The series will be offered as a bundle on my website www.bart.nootboom.nl

Hannah Arendt made her famous, and contested, claim of the ‘banality of evil’. With Adolf Eichmann as the leading example, she claimed that the Nazi evil of the Holocaust was perpetrated as a cool, humdrum, bureaucratic affair, by normal people who were not themselves possessed by an evil spirit.

That may be seen as frightening: Eichmann is all of us, the mass of normal people.

In a recent article^{vi}, the Dutch philosopher Hans Achterhuis claimed, to the contrary, that it is a consolation: to be realized, evil needs lots of normal people to work its destruction, and why would they all comply?

In his analysis, something is missing, I think. That is Foucault’s line of thought, with his proposal that social systems (prisons, clinics, lunatic asylums, scientific communities)

constitute 'regimes of truth'. We see all the time, in a great variety of cases, that normal people come to tacitly accept their enculturation in such regimes, taking the ruling 'truth' as given, the way things are and should be. Large majorities of people come to not only tolerate but to actively and conscientiously adopt institutionalized views and practices that deeply harm people, and become blind to their injustice.

That applied not only to the holocaust but also, as far as I can see, to apparatchiks enacting communist terror.

Apart from such extreme cases, it applies much more widely in less gruesome but still inhuman practices. In asylums, painful and deadening lobotomies were routinely performed on mental patients.

In civilized European countries refugees and their children in large numbers are routinely subjected to loss of civil rights and liberties and normal perspectives of education, jobs and care.

So, the point is not that many normal people are required to enact vast misery, so that it should be possible to stop it. The point is that normal people are routinely carried along in the social systems that bring forth the misery, and take it for granted, the right thing to do.

Achterhuis says that to be co-opted in inhumane practices people must suffer from a lack of a 'sense of reality'. But the point is that the social system in which they are assimilated and percolated produces their reality. He points to the Danish for the example of a people that said 'no' to Eichmann's demand to put Jewish fellow citizens on transport to the camps. Yes: they were socialised in a different culture.

And what we now see happening in so-called normal European countries, including Denmark, is a slide into racism, intolerance, and discrimination that is becoming the 'proper', and, again, the patriotic, view, in contempt and derision of what is becoming the political incorrectness of 'weak', 'naïve', or 'spineless' tolerance and multiculturalism.

ⁱ In an interview on 'Truth and power' in 1976, reprinted in James D. Faubion (ed.), *Essential works of Foucault 1954-1984*, volume 3, Power, The New Press, 2000.

ⁱⁱ Michel Trebitsch & Marie-Chistine Granjon (eds.), *Pour une histoire comparée des intellectuels*, Editions Complexe, 1998.

ⁱⁱⁱ Also from Trebitsch & Granjon

^{iv} Jean-Paul Sartre, *Plaidoyer pour les intellectuels*, a lecture given in Tokio in 1965.

^v In a lecture at the College de France on 10th January 1979.

^{vi} In the *Groene Amsterdammer*, 12-05-2016.