

Foucault and Social Science

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A philosopher's importance cannot be measured with a single rod. Part of his thought may be either forgotten or taken up again. It can die and come back to life. In their lifetime, some philosophers enjoyed an earthly Olympus that toppled down soon enough. Some were posthumous. Foucault ceased to think twenty years ago. Twenty years later, Foucault is not just a problem of reception. He is an attitude that can be sustained, and a decision that is no longer his.

How to measure the importance of his thought? What is being assessed? Which are the right criteria?

Kant died two hundred years ago. No one can deny the place he occupied in the history of thought, his position as a hinge between a before and an after that, incidentally, he contributed to create. Still, perhaps his privileged standing, his territorialization within the history of philosophy, prevents us from realizing that, had Kant not existed, many of our approaches to or creation of our objects in the field of social science might never have been what they are. He fathered Peirce's semiotics, Weber's connection between intention and action, the whole of critical tradition –i.e. Marx and Adorno and the wisdom of Frankfurt- and Hannah Arendt, and all of the liberal thought, *anche* social democracy. He made us possible. Then, I find an exceptional –intentionally exceptional- rod, and take it as my starting point to talk about Foucault.

I shall begin at the beginning: a thought that alters the manners of thought, that pushes us onto the crossroads of continuing doing things in the same way or destroying what has been established. The practice of critical thought, and criticism that does not respond to a pattern but is involved in the present time. "Criticism should not be the premise of a reasoning whose final words would be 'here, then, is what remains to be done'. Criticism should serve as a tool for those who fight, who resist, and who reject what is. It should be used during processes of conflict, confrontation, and attempts at rejection. It should not dictate the law to the law. It is not a stage in a program. It is a challenge to what is."¹ Criticism, then, but not the kind that supports itself on a display of power that would allow for a prophetic or prescriptive truth; criticism that abstains from instructing us on what to do because it is not dependent on operating changes in the minds of people but that merely –merely, indeed? - lets real actors take the field.

Alternatively, if you will, in Foucault's words: "I have great news for you: the problem of prisons is not, in my view, the problem of 'social workers'; it is the problem of convicts."² Criticism that does not deny the need for work to be performed by intellectuals as a diagnostic function of topicality, which "does not consist in just defining what we are but that, following our times' lines of fragility, implies success in grasping where and how what is could no longer be what it is. It is in this sense that description ought to be made, always in accordance with this virtual fracture, so to speak, that opens up a space for freedom understood as concrete freedom; that is to say, as possible transformation."³ Thus intellectuals are accurately outlined bearing the features of those who can show how things have been done and, in so doing, can make it possible to undo them.

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¹ "Table ronde du 20 mai 1978" in *Dits et écrits. IV. 1980-1988*. Paris, Gallimard, 1994, pp. 23-38, and 32. My translation into Spanish.

² *Ib-idem*, p. 32.

³ "Structuralisme et poststructuralisme" in *Telos Journal*, Vol. XVI, #55, Spring 1983, pp. 195-211.

In times when thoughts are muddled, we miss his lucidity and his capacity of discernment. In times when thoughts are weakened, we miss his powerful discourse, his strength, and his firmness. We need to understand that discourse can operate, and there is nothing wrong about this. "Power is neither the source nor the origin of discourse. Power operates through discourse, for discourse itself is a constituent of a strategic device in relations of power."⁴ That is why writing this also entails enthusiastic but not detached support of one or other of the sides struggling in the arena of social science thought.

The joy of thinking

When every cow is black or every cat is dun, when the desert poses a threat, a certain dose of hardness is needed. Not the numbing hardness of a rock, but the sharpness of a lucid intellect that facilitates vision and leads the way towards a different kind of thought. For thinking well may be joyful, and science may be made happy.

Foucault has come into our academic world through the door of social science, not through the door of philosophy: avatars of a more hearty welcome owing to the contingency of the fall of the models that were. A peculiar philosopher was he. "My books are neither treatises of philosophy nor studies in history; at most, they are philosophical shards on the flower beds of history."⁵ He recreated the notion of power so that it could thus be used by sociology and political science, and he criticized social work: "social work is inscribed within a large function that has not ceased to acquire new dimensions for centuries; I mean the vigilance – correction function. To keep vigilance on and correct individuals, in both senses of the word, that is, either punish them or teach them within the framework of pedagogy"⁶, or rather –and this amounts to the same thing– he makes us aware of boundaries, positing communication as the hinge that permits a different way of elucidating language; he turns psychology into an issue of discussion, criticizes psychoanalysis, speaks about geography, gets involved in endless arguments with historians, while in the background there stands the most cutting criticism of anthropology ever seen. Rather than stressing the unselfish knowledge of the aseptic scientist, he never fails to emphasize relations: the plexus of relations involved in knowledge and the very interested nature of each research and each study. He was not addressing us; he was not strictly addressing sociologists, social workers, or communicators. He spoke of us and did not speak of us at once when he brought human sciences into discussion, but ended up by questioning us about who we are and how we do what we do. An uncomfortable snapshot of a field of work; sciences that were above or below others; sciences that from their very origins were embroiled by their place of emergence in the field of knowledge rather than by the specificity of their object of study. In spite of all the above, what a wealth of roads he has opened for us to walk! Multiple pathways, for method should basically be adopted as a position on a battlefield. In these abrupt turns, the display of a peaceful, contractual model ruling the field and the possibility of thinking about it from a different viewpoint –let us say, from a belligerent viewpoint– has made us his debtors. As for the rest, an inventory will have to be made: micropowers, the control society, discourse as he understood it, power as something productive but not restrictive, his notion of subjectivation and his ideas of sexuality in gender studies stand out all around.

In 1969, Foucault established his position regarding the then pioneering role of linguistics and its relation to social science.⁷ By dismantling the myth of a modern linguistics that might have meant the creation of a model for the social sciences, Foucault proved the superiority of pre-Saussurean theories of language over the rest of the social sciences. "Therefore, the permanent relation between the social sciences and the sciences of language is

⁴ "Dialogue on Power" in *Chez Foucault* (S. Wade, comp.). Los Angeles, Circabook, 1978, pp. 4-22.

⁵ "Table ronde du 20 mai 1978" in *Dits et écrits. IV. 1980-1988*. Paris, Gallimard, 1994, pp. 21, 23 and 24.

⁶ "Table ronde", in *Esprit* magazine #413, April-May 1972, pp. 678-703.

⁷ "Linguistique et sciences sociales", in *Revue Tunisienne des Sciences Sociales*, #19, December 1969, pp. 248-255. Also in *Dits et écrits. Op. cit.*, pp. 821-842. My translation into Spanish.

no novelty. The epistemologic imbalance between the sciences of language and the other human sciences is not a thing of today. I am not calling into question the fact that transformational linguistics or structural linguistics have reached a high scientific level, but it seems to me that as from the 19th Century the sciences of language have achieved a much higher degree of accuracy and demonstrability than all of the other social or human sciences put together.”⁸ Foucault declares that it is not about the construction of a paradigm –the structuralist paradigm- that might seem to offer a solution for the social sciences in that it constituted an outpost, but rather that the scientific level reached by the sciences of language preexisted structuralism, so this is where a relation of methodological dependence can be or has been posited. Strictly speaking, “the new element lies in the fact that linguistics can give the social sciences epistemologic possibilities that are different from the ones it used to.”⁹ He then tracks down the differences that allow the new imbrication between between linguistics and the social sciences. Foucault emphasizes two aspects: 1) the possibility or impossibility of extrapolating linguistic standards into other fields; 2) the removal of causality as the concatenating element. While the former leads to an empirical domain that needs decoding, the latter is the significant part. The thinkers of the 60s viewed linguistics as the constitution of a system that resulted in the possibility of turning the social sciences into a science. The ‘poor relatives’ of science acquired a status that enabled them to go through doors that even the natural sciences had barely managed to reach. The scandal lay in the fact that the kinship could be legalized; in that sense, the threshold of formalization –the last step in the constitution of a discipline- was a gift the social sciences were given by structuralism. This scandal was made possible because causality as a regime gave way to a different operation: “the insertion of logic into the very heart of the real.”¹⁰ Rationalization adopted a different model: relations could be formalized, and a relational field could be constituted while disowning causal determinism. It is interesting that Foucault proposed that the difference between the two ways of approaching language from a general standpoint –Port Royal’s linguistics and Saussure’s theory- differ in that the former views language as the translation of thought while the latter thinks it is a manner of communication. It is a striking difference we are talking about, since substantialism dissolves in relations. “In this new perspective, the collective will no longer be the universalization of thought; that is to say, some sort of big subject acting as social conscience, or a basal personality, or a ‘spirit of the times’. Now the collective is a set of communication poles; it is composed of codes effectively used and by the frequency and the structure of the messages sent.”¹¹

Judging from these assertions, one might think that Foucault had become a structuralist. However, at that same round table, he made sure to clear up that this was not the case.¹² Still, not being a structuralist does not imply blindness to differences. Strictly speaking, phenomenology and its corollary, hermeneutics, together with the Hegelian thought that can still be found under certain readings of Marx, marked the epistemic models that informed the social sciences at the time. However, the most serious problem is history: history as a safe receptacle that dissolves differences, as a *deus ex machina* that reconciles positions. Structuralism will become precisely the hobbyhorse used against dialectics and a notion of history that some would have us believe to be safe –the receptacle that dissolves all contradictions. This is why Foucault posits that the synchronic viewpoint is not ahistorical, let alone anti-historical. Quite the contrary, it can give rise to a possibility of change: “Synchronic analysis operated by linguists is not quite the analysis of what is static and still; rather, it is the analysis of the conditions of change”¹³, or “This analysis of the necessary and sufficient conditions for the intervention of a local change is equally necessary and practically essential so that the said

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 822.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 823.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 824.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 825.

¹² “In principle, I shall tell you something that Paris does not seem yet to know: I am not a structuralist. Except for some pages in which I deeply regret having used it, I have never resorted to the word ‘structure’. When I speak of structuralism, I mean an epistemological object contemporary to me.” *Ibid*, p. 838.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 826.

analysis can become a practical, effective intervention, since here the problems lies in learning what we need to change, supposing we want to operate a change in the total field of relations.”¹⁴

To Foucault, the main dead weight affecting the social sciences –which are not an exact equivalent of what the French call *sciences humaines*¹⁵– is that they have come to life through the turn of thought we owe to anthropology; for example, Kant’s assertion, in the late 18th Century, of finitude as the basis; knowledge that is precisely human because it is founded by a finite subject who opens the possibility of objectivizing finitude. The social sciences are but the corollary of one way of producing philosophy: what is man? Foucault’s criticism of the human sciences is grounded on humanism. To him, modernity starts with Kant’s dictum that a subject constitutes a *sine qua non* condition of all knowledge. Unlike every other subject postulated before by the rationalist tradition, this subject is a man, a finitude, a being bound into his limitations, into a sensibility that makes him what he is, that restricts his shape. For the first time, the basis of knowledge comes under the weight of an intransgressible sensibility. The search for boundaries strengthens the very possibility of knowing. *Incipit* man, a unique being, a historical construct, together with the excessively human Kantean invention, there appear a number of sciences whose object is man himself. So that this could be so, there arose the need for the acceptance of an unmodifiable subject; i.e. of a fixed subject that could be taken as the base of knowing¹⁶ –already posed by Descartes–, though Decartes’ subject has no boundaries and is a sort of net able to connect whatever is and whatever is possible. But the critical attitude, the one that involves determining the scope and limitations of our knowledge, throws the ‘beyond’ overboard, and man is constructed within the given walls of time and space. This turn decides whether man –or the human- is able to become objects of knowledge. This is why Kant’s fourth question, the one that provided the answer to the other three, was “what is man?” In addition, the specific quality of human nature was its finitude. There is a passage from the establishment of boundaries and the legitimate use of reason to a field where that which can be cognizable is constituted: *Ecce homo*. Fixity and boundaries that, nevertheless, found the possibility of knowledge moving on towards the infinite. But how so? Along what paths?

Foucault denounces a disciplinarian operation within the human sciences: “It would not be possible to isolate [...] the rise of the social science from the development of the new political rationality or the new political technology. We all know that ethnology is a by-product of colonization –which does not amount to say that it is an imperialist science. I likewise believe that if man –that is, we, beings of life, of word, and of labor- has become an object to other sciences, the reason for this is not to be sought in ideology but in the existence of the political technology that we have created in the bosom of our societies.”¹⁷ A whole corpus of philosophy sweeps through our assumptions, our desire of universality, our regimes of truth, and our methods. Foucault always viewed anthropology as a road leading nowhere, and he did not like the paths in the woods. Then philosophy and the human sciences do not lie on opposite sides; the imbrication between both has been the cornerstone of the latter, in more than one sense:

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 827.

¹⁵ In French academic taxonomy, the grid is not the same as ours. What we call ‘social sciences’ is and is not related to what the French call human sciences. Strictly speaking, *sciences humaines* does not name sciences related to man in general but only those addressing what is specific of nature in man. For example, they do not comprise anatomy, for their object is that which used to be studied by *moral sciences*; i.e., the human soul and social relations. Thus, psychology and literary appreciation, which are not part of this School’s curricula, are human sciences. Of course, it is easier to classify sociology and demography as social sciences, and Foucault does so. On the other hand, he only uses this expression when prompted to; this is the case when geography or architecture are being discussed, but not without enclosing relevance between brackets in the latter case, for he prefers to call this *téjné* rather than science.

¹⁶ This is the axis of his latest works: the difference between a moving subject, capable of transformation and self-transformation in ancient times, and a fixed subject produced at the “Cartesian moment” –not that he is making Descartes responsible for it- who constitutes the condition of the possibility of knowing while he establishes a relation to truth, marked only by the knowledge that will eventually turn him into an object. See *Hermenéutica del sujeto*. Class of January 6, 1982, 1st period. México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002, pp. 31 *passim*.

¹⁷ “La technologie politique des individus”, in *Dits et écrits. IV. Op. cit.*, pp. 813- 828.

“Ever since the 19th Century, the human sciences have held a rather entangled relation with philosophy. How can this entanglement between them be understood? One could say that, in the Western world, philosophy had circumscribed –blindly, in a void, in darkness, in the night of its own consciousness and methodology- the domain it named thought or the soul. This domain is now the heritage to be exploited by the human sciences in a clear, lucid, and positive manner. Thus the human sciences are fully entitled to occupy the rather blurry domain outlined yet uncultivated by philosophy.”¹⁸ That would satisfy a positivistic perspective, but not Foucault’s: “perhaps since the 19th Century, Western philosophy has been destined to open the possibility of something that could be called anthropology. By anthropology I do not mean the particular science that goes by that name and that deals with the study of cultures alien to ours. To me, anthropology is a constituent structure of philosophy that has shifted the problems studied by philosophy so that they now dwell within the domain that we could call ‘human finitude’. If the only subject on which we can philosophize is man as *homo natura*, or even as a finite entity, when all is said and done, would all philosophy not be some sort of anthropology? At that point, philosophy becomes the form of culture inside which all human sciences are possible.”¹⁹

The human sciences enjoy a rather odd status: they deny themselves. By human sciences we mean psychology, sociology, literary appreciation, and analysis of myths, since these regions have been explicitly demarcated by a basso continuo that brings out their problems, and we also include history, a privileged though dangerous shelter. “It is pointless to say that the human sciences are false sciences or no sciences at all. The configuration that defines their positive quality, rooting them in the modern episteme, drives them away from their scientific status at one and the same time. What prevents man from becoming an object of science is not his unyielding nature, or what has been called his invincible transcendence, or the vastness of his complexity. Under the name of man, Western culture has constructed an entity which, for a single interplay of reasons, must be a positive domain of knowledge but cannot be an object of science.”²⁰

In other words –and this is a diagnosis- the social sciences do not owe their existence to a particular management of power that can be traced back in history: “There is no denying that the historical rise of each of the human sciences has occurred on the occasion of a problem, a demand, or a theoretical/practical obstacle. The new rules imposed on individuals by the Industrial Revolution slowly constituted psychology as a science in the 19th Century; the threats posed to social equilibrium as well as to the balance installed by the bourgeoisie aided the birth of sociological thought.”²¹ Yet something else was needed: an event in the field of knowledge.

The social sciences are the daughters of a philosophy that has to be abandoned: “However, when I say that this *impasse* is as inevitable as it is fatal, I would not criticize it as a science; I would not say that it lacks positive qualities as a science; I would not say that it should encompass more or less philosophical features. I would just say that there has been something like an anthropological dream in which both philosophy and human sciences have lain fascinated in slumber with each other, and that it is necessary to wake up from the anthropological dream just as in other times man shook off his dogmatic dream.”²²

It can be done

Foucault took the essay very seriously. “The essay, understood as a self-modifying test in the game of truth rather than as a simplified appropriation of the other for the sake of communication, is the living body of philosophy, at least if philosophy keeps being what it was,

¹⁸ “Philosophie et psychologie” (conversation with Alain Badiou, February 27, 1965), in *Dits et écrits. I*, pp. 438-448.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 439.

²⁰ *Les mots et les choses*. Paris, Gallimard, 1966, p. 378.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 356.

²² “Philosophie et psychologie” (conversation with A. Badiou). *Op. cit.* He is actually discussing psychology, but it can be extended to the whole of human sciences.

i. e. an ascesis, a self-exercise in thought.”²³ It is not only about writing. It is a manner of approaching an object and, at the same time, an attempt at transformation. That is why Foucault, driven by the many topics and situations, deploys so many movements into other ways of thinking. The ‘how’ is related to the ‘what’. There is never a prescribed mode of broaching a subject; it all depends. But there is indeed a reflection about how to broach the subject. Foucault invents methods, while at the same time he denies them the possibility of becoming generalized. Archeology, genealogy, eventualization, problematization are but the approaches he attempted. Attempting means experimenting, operating changes on oneself based on knowledge. The two poles –the cognizant subject and the known field- are mutable not fixed. This is why archeology appears as “a kind of research dedicated to extract discursive facts as if they were recorded in archives”²⁴, seeking to account for the material singularity of enunciates. In other words, it demolishes structuralism insofar as it appears as a form of what is general, as the way in which the specimen is subsumed in the type. Foucault opposes all hermeneutic views of language: it is not about the logic of the structure or the logic of meaning. Neither is it a plausible type of research into language, even when it is done with language as its object: “If I am doing this, it is to find out what we are today”. Genealogy is also explored on the domain of singularity: provenance/emergence. To trace the complex thread of provenance amounts to “maintaining what happened in its characteristic dispersion [...], discovering that truth and being are not to be found in the root of what we are and know; we shall find them in the outwardness of the accidental.”²⁵ To posit emergence is to account for a state of forces that constitute its condition of possibility. Eventualization is presented as an analytical process: “In principle, a rupture of evidence. Where one would feel tempted to refer to a historical constant or to an immediate anthropological feature, or even to some piece of evidence that grows upon all of us in the same way, the issue is to bring forth “singularity”. The issue is to show that this was not “indispensable”; it was not so evident that the insane should be acknowledged as mentally sick; it was not so evident that imprisonment was the only way to deal with criminals; it was not so evident that the causes of illness would be found in the individual examination of a body, etc. A rupture of evidence, the evidence which supports our knowledge, our consent, and our practice.”²⁶ Problematization consists in elucidating “how and why certain things (behavior, phenomena, processes) become a problem.”²⁷

In all cases, it is about going against the tide. Opponents can be clearly outlined: structuralism, but also the philosophies of meaning, and it should be pointed out that in the latter case we not only mean those that posit a subject as the source of meaning but also the ones that propose a logic of meaning. Let us say, Deleuze; dialectics and its conception of a *telos* in front of which all singularity succumbs because that is precisely its condition of existence, but also such philosophies as intend to find, in the origins, both the light that may illuminate some development and the clarity concealed by an act of clouding; linear causalism; encapsulation in an area (whether an economic mechanism, an anthropological structure, a key to analysis, or an invariant); specific determinism; what is subsumed into what is said. Thus analytical processes generate “weird” objects -preliminary, marginal, or more than marginal- whose edges are open to other connections, including a multiplicity of complexities in the game. Nothing is linearly predictable, but what is can be mapped; its fragility can be shown, together with the possible lines of fracture that will enable a transformation that, by the way, does not naturally follow from a state of affairs. What is established becomes undone through the internal decomposition

²³ *Historia de la sexualidad. Volumen 2. El uso de los placeres*. Mexico, Siglo XXI Editores, 1986, p. 12.

²⁴ “Dialogue on Power”, in *Chez Foucault* (S. Wade, comp.). Los Angeles, Circabook, 1978, pp. 4-22. In many of the writings in which Foucault insists that his field of work is the present time, particularly in texts about Enlightenment, where the present divides the waters between modern and pre-modern philosophers; we might add that post-modern philosophers, so much behind the times, could be included in the second group.

²⁵ “Nietzsche, la genealogía, la historia”, in *Microfísica del poder*. Madrid, Ediciones de La Piqueta, Madrid, 1979, p. 13.

²⁶ “Table ronde du 20 mai 1978”, in *Dits et écrits. IV. 1980-1988*. Paris, Gallimard, 1994, pp. 23-24.

²⁷ “Coraje y verdad”, in *El último Foucault*, (Tomás Abraham, comp.). Buenos Aires, Editorial Sudamericana, 2002, p. 389.

of processes resulting in accidental outwardness; endless plurality, or growing polymorphism. An ever open analysis, with its possibilities and its limitations: “It is obvious that, regarding what I propose, there is too much and too little. Too many diverse relations, too many lines of analysis. And, at the same time, not enough universal necessity. A plethora on the side of intelligibilities. Want on the side of necessity”²⁸. Still, that is also a choice: “We are not under the sign of a single need, nor do we wish to occupy that place.”²⁹. However, denying the unicity of necessity does not mean that anything is possible. What is possible at whatever historical period appears as “a response to some concrete, specific aspect of the world.”³⁰. In his latest works, Foucault deals precisely with this issue regarding the constitution of the subject in relation to truth. Men that construct themselves and that are constructed; relative creations. It is an interesting moment, because it accounts for a form of freedom that is not connected to emancipation but with what a life can or cannot achieve. A figure that is embroiled or randomly found in a mesh of purely accidental relations; and this is so if “man is an invention whose newness and perhaps imminent disappearance are easily seen from the archeology of our thought. If such dispositions vanish in the same way they have emerged. If, just as the grounds of classical thought rocked around the 18th Century, some event whose possibility we can only sense but whose form or promise we do not yet know were to happen, we might well bet that man will vanish like a face drawn on the sand by the sea.”³¹ It is so precisely because, who can tell what this body –a human body- can do if we deprive it of fixity, if we lay it open to contingency, to accidents, forgetting the issues of essence and boundaries? To deprive man of his intrinsic value is no less than turn him not human from the point of view of his possibility of being different from what he is. For the bodies and souls of men of flesh and blood are constructed. The play of constitutions is extremely vast, and so is the field of determinations. But it can be done. Freedom can be achieved –not just freedom of thought, which must be assumed, but also concrete freedom; that is, the possibility of transforming others and of transforming ourselves. Foucault only lays emphasis, and in so doing he opens our eyes. Such is the privilege of a discourse that clears our sight, that comes to us devoid of prophetic nuances, that never points to what should be, that does not even entice us (by means of the subjunctive, which brings insidious suggestions that our lives should be lived in this or that way; comforting formulas that encourage the yearning that the road is to be found in some moment, in some place, or in the power of some thought, disconnected from what we are living.) There are many roads, so it does not really matter whether Foucault’s works present us with a methodology or with a gap in the theory of knowledge. If there were any, in the plural, no attempt at universalization ensued. Foucault’s project is aimed at our not knowing what to do, at our discussing and problematizing what is given as well as what we do. This is the expected outcome, and here lies the reason why more often than not Foucault proposes us to stay outdoors, exposed to wind and weather, rather than profit from the hard-earned firmness of the soil or of a reasonably stable building. No thought is more alive than that which undergoes transformations. Since today Foucault can only be through others, let us not fix him in a formula, in a schema. He thought and lived as he pleased. The lack of schema may be a matter of irritation, above all in the social sciences, which in our milieu are still viewed as weakly and lacking. On the other hand, it can also be an adventure. Nothing pre-exists, whether in life or thought. We produce them *ad hoc*. They are not models or recipes: “Tools cannot be made to serve sundry purposes. They have to be made with a clear purpose in mind, yet knowing that they might be used for other aims. The ideal thing is to make bombs rather than tools, for once the bombs we make have exploded, no one else will be able to use them. I feel bound to add that my dream –my personal dream- is not exactly to make bombs, for I do not enjoy killing. Still, I would like to write bomb-books; I mean, books that will be useful at the precise moment when they are being read or written. Then they would disappear. These books would disappear shortly after being used or read. Books should be just some kind of bomb. After the explosion, people

²⁸ “Table ronde du 20 mai 1978”, in *Dits et écrits. IV. 1980-1988*. Paris, Gallimard, 1994, pp. 20-34.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 25.

³⁰ “Coraje y verdad”, in *El último Foucault. Op. cit.*, p. 391.

³¹ *Le mots et les choses*. Paris, Gallimard, 1966, p. 398.

might be reminded that these books have produced beautiful fireworks. Later on, historians and others specialists will say that this or that book has been as useful as a bomb and as beautiful as fireworks.³²”

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Abstract:

Twenty years after Foucault’s death, special emphasis is made on his contributions to the field of social sciences. Firstly, the practice of the sort of criticism that implies reflecting about knowledge from some place where action is possible, in post-modern times. Foucault’s elucidation of the human sciences, whose theoretical genealogy he traces back to Kant’s *Was ist der Mensch?* sheds light on a question whose historical answer has been provided from an anthropological standpoint that led the way to the so-called human sciences. He also shows the social demands that are, concurrently, their condition of possibility. And, last but not least, this paper speaks of his standing and lucidity to point to ways without turning them into recipes, inviting us to find the courage of thinking by ourselves.

Published in **Sociedad**. Social Science Journal, School of Social Sciences, University of Buenos Aires, #23. Buenos Aires Argentina.

Translated by Marta Ines Merajver
Translation from Sociedad (Buenos Aires) no.23, año 2005

³² “Dialogue on Power”, en *Chez Foucault* (S. Wade, comp.). Los Angeles, Circabook, 1978, páginas 4-22.