

## Foucault: Truth in Action

by Dinah RIBARD

**Michel Foucault's lectures at the Collège de France were dedicated, in 1982-1983, to "the drama of truth", that is to say to the manner in which the enunciation of truth changes he who has the courage to speak it. Because, for Foucault, philosophical discourse is not only the bearer of rational thought, but also and above all thought in action.**

Reviewed: Michel Foucault, *Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres. Cours au Collège de France, 1982-1983*, (*The Government of Self and Others. Lectures from the Collège de France, 1982-1983*. Not yet published in English)

Editors François Ewald et Alessandro Fontana, by Frédéric Gros, Paris, Gallimard / Le Seuil, « Hautes Etudes », 2008, 382 p.

*The Government of Self and Others* opens with a famous analysis of Kant's "Was ist Aufklärung" (What is the Enlightenment?), that Foucault described on January 5 (p.8) as a: "text that is a bit of a herald, a bit iconic to me." This is the first edition, strictly speaking, of what was only known until now from the text of May 27, 1978 at the *Société française de philosophie* (French Society of Philosophy) entitled "*Qu'est-ce que la critique?*" (What is criticism?), which was published in the Bulletin of this organisation and not republished in the posthumous collection of Foucault's spoken and written words entitled in French "Dits et Ecrits"<sup>1</sup>, and which

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1 Frédéric Gros insists in his "Context of the Lessons" (Situation du cours), p. 349-350, on the differences between the analysis of 1978 and that of 1983, and notably on the abandonment of the perspective of "un-subjection" (désassujettissement), all the while emphasising that Foucault continues to see himself as a part of the "critical" rather than the transcendental heritage of Kant. Foucault, at the end of the first hour of classes on January 5, speaks indeed of the two traditions

was also published in *Magazine littéraire* in May 1984, a month before the death of Foucault. This article, an early homage and a publishing event, came precisely from the lessons of January 1983 of the Collège de France. We therefore have the complete and authorized analysis of “the ontology of current events” at our disposition now. But this release also gives context to the analysis and brings up new questions: what link is there between this “ontology of current events”, also called by Foucault “ontology of ourselves” and, once beyond the initial “herald”, “the drama of the truth” to which the essential of the lectures of 1982-1983 is dedicated?

### **Truth in politics**

The connection should first be sought out in the practice of Foucault’s teaching. For the audience at Collège de France, he reads and comments on texts, often at length, first that of Kant, then those of Euripides and Plato, as well as those of Plutarch (which tells of the confrontation between the philosopher and the tyrant Dionysius of Syracuse, an exemplary scene of *parrhesia*: the courage of truth), Polybe or Thucydides. These analyses of texts allow him to report on the historical displacement of antique “straight talk”—transformed little by little at the epoch of Plato and with Plato, from an attribute and obligation of the Athenian citizen that he was, into a necessary aid of the sage to the Prince—to a question that today reaches out to us across these political experiences, in their very differences: the question of the rise and the incidence of truth in politics. On page 168, it is still the Athenian democracy that Foucault speaks of, in conclusion of an analysis of the difference between good *parrhesia*, defined on the basis of the discourse of Pericles at Thucydides, and bad *parrhesia* understood, with the help of Isocrates, as a false discourse that flatters the dominant opinions to ensure the security of the speaker. He thus comments:

“Well, in one epoch, our own, where we like so much to present problems of democracy in terms of the distribution of power, of the autonomy of each in the

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founded by Kant and between which modern philosophy is divided, by specifying that the two traditions are “critical”. On the one hand the “analytic of the truth” (p. 22) which is found in the analytical Anglo-Saxon philosophy and on the other hand the “ontology of the present”, “of current affairs”, “of modernity”, “of ourselves” (ibid.) which goes “from Hegel to the Frankfurt school, passing by Nietzsche, Max Weber, etc.” and which represents the form of reflection to which he attaches himself.

exercise of power, in terms of transparency and opaqueness, of relations between civil society and the State, I think that it is perhaps good to remember this old question, which was contemporary to the workings of Athenian democracy and its crises, that is to say the question of true discourse and of the necessary, indispensable and fragile split that true discourse cannot not introduce into a democracy, a democracy which at the same time makes this discourse possible and threatens it endlessly.”

The drama of truth constitutes the analysis of these “facts of discourse that show how the very moment of enunciation can affect the being of the enunciator” who has the courage to speak the truth and to tie himself, by free choice, to its dangerous utterance (p.66). It comes back to the ontology of current affairs, through the injunction to think for oneself (“sapere aude!”) that the text “Was ist Aufklärung?” sets out on a more and more manifestly paradoxical mode as it is presented, through the elegy of the liberating power of the King of Prussia.

### **From the philosophy of acts of language to language in action**

The importance of this long-awaited course, indeed partly known before its publication, allows one to go straight to the question of the use that can be made of it today. While an entire line of works inspired by the lessons of Foucault’s last years is dedicated to developing a history of the relationships between the philosophical cultivation of one’s own soul and the formation of that of the (good) prince, thus made capable of governing well, it appears here that these questions of intellectual history, less rich than others he presented in 1982-1983, was probably no longer central for him at this time. In one sense, the lectures of 1982-1983, through the “drama of the truth” return to older texts of Foucault, above all *The Order of Discourse*, which presented the historical emergence of “the opposition between the true and the false”:

“In the works of Greek poets of the sixth century still, the true discourse—in the strong, substantive sense of the term—the true discourse for which one had respect and terror, the one to which it was better to submit oneself, because it ruled, was the discourse pronounced by he who had the right, according to the required ritual; [...] it was the discourse that, foreseeing the future, not only announced what

was going to happen, but contributed to its realisation, gained the adhesion of men and thus weaved itself with destiny. But then only a century later the highest truth already no longer resides in what discourse was or in what it was doing, it resided in what was being said: a day came when the truth was displaced from the ritualised, effective and accurate act, from the act of utterance, to the statement itself; towards its meaning, its form, its object, its relation to the reference. Between Hesiod and Plato a certain sharing was established, separating the true discourse from the false discourse; a new sharing, since, from then on, true discourse is no longer the precious and desirable discourse, since it is no longer the discourse linked to the exercise of power. The sophist is ousted.”<sup>2</sup>

The banishment of the sophist is found again in *The Government of Self and Others*, when Foucault comes back, at the end of the course, to the Platonic opposition between rhetoric and philosophy (lessons from the 2 and 9 March). The novelty of the “drama of truth”, through the continuation of the same story, is found in the emphasis that is placed on staying on the outside of any pragmatics, of any philosophy of the acts of language and, in truth, of any philosophy of language: *parrhesia* is not performative. Instead, these are the conditions of a reflection on discourse as an event, as a production, as a necessarily situated action that are put into place: one can read in this sense the propositions on the “reality of philosophy”, on the philosophical discourse as a task, *ergon*, and not a mere *logos* (p. 209 and following). One should not rush to complaints that Foucault then cuts off his analysis of discourse from that of its social and therefore historical conditions, nor to remark that the list of characters likely to be the object of a “dramatic” study (“the prophet, the seer, the philosopher, the scholar”, p.66) is filled with figures that have a status, therefore that one can refer to pragmatics. The essential point in this lesson where he fully, resolutely and deliberately appears as a philosopher is found elsewhere, in the momentum that the reflection on the “courage of truth” successfully gathers outside the “history of systems of thought” towards another possible history, this one without barrier: a history of thought, of speech, of truth in action.

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2 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Discourse*. Inaugural lesson at the Collège de France on December 2, 1970, Paris, Gallimard, 1971, pp. 15-18 (French edition page numbers). One sees that Foucault opposed the prophetic discourse to the philosophical discourse, while in *The Government of Self and Others*, the speech of the medium is included in the facts of discourse susceptible to be the object of a dramatic rather than pragmatic analysis.

**Translated from french by Julie De Rouville**

**Further readings :**

- *Les usages de Foucault*, by Frédéric Gros (in French)

About the book by Philippe Artières and Mathieu Potte-Bonneville, *D'après Foucault. Gestes, luttes, programmes*, Paris, Les Prairies Ordinaires, 2007.

- The site of the Michel Foucault Archives lists the majority of sites dedicated to his work:  
<http://www.michel-foucault-archives.org>

- Website of the Collège de France : <http://www.college-de-france.fr/>

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