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Review essay

Myth as critique?

Michel Foucault, *'Society Must Be Defended': Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003)

'Society must be defended against all the biological threats posed by the other race, the subrace, the counter-race that we are, despite ourselves, bringing into existence.'

'*Society Must Be Defended*' comprises Michel Foucault's course of 11 lectures delivered at the Collège de France between January and March 1976. This volume represents the first complete English translation of these lectures, not published in France until 1997 as *'Il faut défendre la société'*.¹ Indeed, this represents the first in what will comprise a 13-volume set of Foucault's lectures at the Collège (1971–1984).² The published volume has been transcribed from audio recordings of Foucault's lectures, and edited in consultation with Foucault's written notes. As the series editors observe, the publication of these lectures heralds 'a new stage in the publication of the "works" of Michel Foucault' (xiv).³ And, as they further suggest by their quotation marks, it is questionable to what extent this should be considered a 'work', since it was never intended for publication in written form.⁴ While it would be a mistake to expect the rigor and depth of Foucault's written texts, the lecture format might afford the lecturer a certain risk he might otherwise be unwilling to take, and in this way, I shall argue, *'Society Must Be Defended'* anticipates much of Foucault's later work on ethics.

Foucault's course summary opens with the following claim: 'In order to make a concrete analysis of power relations, we must abandon

the juridical model of sovereignty' (265). Rather than studying the terms of the power relationship, Foucault argues, we must study the relationship itself: 'rather than asking ideal subjects what part of themselves or their powers they have surrendered in order to let themselves become subjects, we have to look at how relations of subjectivation [*assujettissement*] can manufacture subjects' (265).⁵ If the subject and its ostensible sovereignty are 'manufactured' [*fabriquer*] through extant power or force relations, this represents an inversion of the traditional Hobbesian or Machiavellian view that power issues from a pre-constituted sovereign subject. (Hobbes' *Leviathan*, three centuries earlier, depicted sovereign power as a type of possession available to be surrendered to the sovereign or head of state – essentially, a state of nature and potential war traded for the peace and security of civil society.)

Foucault's lectures fall between the French publication of *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* (1976). Readers of these texts will here recognize a familiar theory of power as a 'fabric', a textile, an interwoven and diffuse network of relations 'that intersect, refer to one another, converge, or, on the contrary, come into conflict and strive to negate one another' (266). Accordingly, we must not privilege the juridical model of sovereignty in the quest for a theory of power; instead, we must unearth the constraints and techniques involved in relations of force, we must establish a 'micro-physics' of power relations. Thinking of power on the basis of irreducibly conflicting forces led Foucault to the question of war and power, and he asks: 'Can war serve as an analyzer of power relations?' (266).

Foucault asserts that a number of questions underlie this coupling of war and power. These questions permeate his course, and I paraphrase them here because they are as vexing today as ever:

- Is war a primary and fundamental order from which all phenomena of domination, differentiation, and social hierarchy should be derived?
- Are processes of antagonism, confrontation, and battles between individuals, groups, or classes derived from more general processes of war?
- Can we analyze power relations through notions derived from bellicose strategies and tactics?
- Are military and bellicose institutions the nucleus of political institutions?
- How, when, and in what way did people begin to imagine that it is war that functions in power relations? (266)

Foucault's course is pessimistic; he takes it as a fact that the specter of war has come to underlie civil society, all manner of conflict, and power relations in general – 'war in the filigree of peace' (267, translation

modified), or, war as ‘the cipher of peace’ (268). His genealogy of war asks when and how this transformation took place: when did Clausewitz’s famous aphorism first get turned on its head, so that we might now say, cynically, that politics is none other than war continued by other means?⁶ In Foucault’s classic style, he asks, what if war is not the *effect* of a set of circumstances and power relations between two (or more) sovereigns? What if, on the contrary, we consider war as a productive force, a sort of pre-judicial *cause*, as it were? What if, instead of presupposing sovereignty, à la Hobbes or Machiavelli, sovereignty itself relies on the productive force of war for its continued *raison d’être*?

Foucault’s genealogy hopes to demonstrate that ‘the war that is going on beneath order and peace, the war that undermines our society and divides it in a binary mode is, basically, a race war’ (59–60). We shall see, however, that by ‘race’, Foucault is not appealing to our modern construal of the term. His analysis proceeds by way of a protracted discussion of three early modern political thinkers or activists. The first is Sir Edward Coke (1552–1634), an eminent jurist in the history of English law. Coke fought for the common law against the powers of the royal prerogative. Curiously, he is known for the dubiousness of his interpretations of the Magna Carta as much as for the persuasiveness of his arguments. Secondly, Foucault discusses John Lilburne (1614?–1657), the leader of the Levelers, a Puritan sect active at the time of the English Civil War in the 1640s. Through mass pamphleteering, the Levelers fought for constitutional reform, universal suffrage (for men, of course), and the abolition of the monarchy under the aegis of a radical politico-religious equality. Both Coke and Lilburne were republicans, and although they lived a generation apart, each was influential in a history that led to the execution of Charles I in 1649 and the brief installation of a republican commonwealth in England. Foucault is not interested in these facts, however, so much as in the stories these men told, reconstructing ‘the main episodes in the history of England’; Foucault’s lectures analyze each episode ‘as either an effect or a resumption of the historically primal state of war that exists between two hostile races which have different institutions and different interests’ (271). In other words, these men told their version of the centuries-old story of the Norman Conquest – telling the story of the Battle of Hastings effectively mobilized the Saxon underdogs against the oppression of the Norman victors and the royal prerogative they represented. Here, ‘race’ is in part constituted through the stories that are told, capitalizing on common interests and institutions, resulting in a mobilization.

Thirdly, in the French context, Foucault discusses at length a French theorist by the name of Comte Henri de Boulainvilliers (1658–1722). Boulainvilliers, like Coke and Lilburne, was an active critic of absolute

monarchy, but unlike them, he battled for the rights of an increasingly disenfranchised nobility against the royal prerogative and the burgeoning Third Estate. Boulainvilliers was a conservative aristocrat, and looking out for his own aristocratic interests, but he is placed by Foucault alongside Coke and Lilburne not so much to show their common political goals – strictly speaking, they are incommensurable – but to underscore their manner of historicizing, ‘establishing a truth that functions as a weapon’ (269). In other words, Foucault is concerned with the narrative strategies and tactics deployed in the fomentation of war. Rather than telling a story that would mobilize the underdog, for Boulainvilliers ‘the story is told, and the rights are demanded, in the name of the victor’ (271) – to mobilize *la noblesse*, whose privilege was waning. Boulainvilliers resurrects the myth of the Trojan War, tracing the French aristocracy back through the Franks directly to Troy. By telling this fabulous history down to the Frankish invasion of Gaul, Boulainvilliers sought to mythically lend the French aristocracy a Franco-Germanic origin, thereby endowing them with ‘a right of conquest, and therefore the preeminent possession of all the lands of the kingdom and absolute domination over all its Gaulish or Roman inhabitants’ (271). This historical fiction also had profound implications for the monarchy. Foucault writes: ‘it is the history of how the king usurped and betrayed the nobility from which he was descended, and of his unnatural collusion with a bourgeoisie of Gallo-Roman descent’ (271). This charge would eventually form an animating kernel of the French Revolution. Boulainvilliers, like Coke and Lilburne, effectively mobilizes a ‘race’ of people through an appeal to stories which are, strictly speaking, false.

This ‘falsity’ notwithstanding, Foucault celebrates these stories as instances of what he calls *historico-political* discourse – a discourse that offers a ‘counter-history’ to the totalizing *philosophico-juridical* discourse⁷ upheld by the sovereign, by the philosophy of the Enlightenment, and by what we have come to take for granted as the rational subject of liberal humanism.⁸ The historico-political counter-history, Foucault tells us, is a discourse that constitutes a marginal knowledge (*savoir*) understood as ‘local, regional, differential, incapable of unanimity’ (8). It is a knowledge that is officially disqualified or even actively silenced, and yet it represents an insurrectionary force ‘against the centralizing power-effects that are bound up with the institutionalization and working of any scientific discourse organized in a society such as ours’ (9). This counter-history is effective not because of its historical accuracy, but in part because these stories are ‘supported by very traditional mythical forms. . . . the lost age of the great ancestors, the imminence of new times and a millenary revenge, the coming of the new kingdom that will wipe out the defeats of old’ (270, translation

modified). The specific function of this discourse 'is not so much to record the past or to speak of origins as to speak of right, to speak of power's right. . . . public right' (116). The effect of such discourse is, significantly, mythic; it is very much visceral, a lifeblood; it animates bodies, courses through the veins of those who revolt; it is that which ties them to the past, their ancestors, gives them courage to revolt, to refuse to be governed in *that way*, to forge their own destiny:

a discourse that will be able to carry both the nostalgia of decaying aristocracies and the ardor of popular revenges . . . essentially a historico-political discourse, a discourse in which truth functions as a weapon for a partisan victory, a discourse that is darkly [*sombrement*] critical and at the same time intensely mythical. (270, translation modified)

To some extent, Foucault is here investigating the 'how' of power – a theme that engaged him throughout the 1970s, but also into the 1980s. Here myth, in some form, rises as the counter-discourse to sovereignty and the sovereign liberal state.

In these lectures, Foucault analyzes power relations not from the position of a sovereign or a Cartesian subject, but genealogically, from the multiple strategies and tactics of war and the individual struggles that characterize war. As we have seen, the narrative is one such strategy. Rather than turning to the autonomous subject of liberal humanism (rational, equal, identical), or to the sovereign state modeled on such subjectivity, Foucault turns instead to a series of local battles. This was the great lesson of power-knowledge, that power is everywhere diffuse, and that likewise, when we conceive of resistance to that power, it should not be as a centralized and univocal force, as if emanating from the subject. There is no power without resistance, Foucault writes; power and resistance are mutually implicated and only artificially abstracted through analysis. As Foucault will write in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*: 'These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary' (95–6).⁹ And yet, while there is no law, no single locus, no rational soul or logical source of revolt and rebellion, political insurrection is nevertheless a fact of life. In these lectures, *myth* works as a singularizing, irrational, illogical animus that binds together local struggles, past wrongs, and future hopes. While it is commonly said that the victors write history, Foucault demonstrates how the sovereign victors must compete with a more diffuse, subversive, messy, yet often ultimately more effective counter-history of the vanquished – a lesson that is often forgotten today. This is an 'explanation from below', as it were; Foucault says that such a counter-history 'uses as an interpretive principle the confusion of violence, passions, hatreds, revenge, and the

tissue of the minor circumstances that create defeats and victories' (269). A mythic (as opposed to a logical) element is the red thread that stitches together these heteronomous historical forces, from passion, hatred, revenge, to narratives of defeat, and of legendary kings and epic battles; we might call it a living historical *zeitgeist*. This is the effective, counter-historical discourse of the underdogs, the vanquished – a discourse that serves to 'awaken, beneath the form of institutions and laws, the forgotten past of real struggles, of masked victories or defeats, the blood that has dried in the codes' (269–70, translation modified). These are 'real struggles', but struggles that are nonetheless 'supported by [*prendre appui sur*]' or read through traditional mythical forms – forms which lend them a truth, an authority, a vigor; nourishing and metaphysically justifying the bold daring of a revolt.

Similar themes have a practical valence in Foucault's writing three years later, in the context of the Iranian revolution of 1978–9. Foucault wrote a series of brief journalistic essays for an Italian newspaper, some of which caused a good deal of political criticism upon their publication in France. In an essay titled 'Useless to Revolt [*se soulever*]?',¹⁰ which appeared in *Le Monde* on 11 May 1979, Foucault discusses *freedom* and *revolt* in a manner which suggests their complementary relationship. In one sense, Foucault defines freedom negatively, over against 'the certainty of having to obey' (449). And if freedom takes on a positive content, it is revolt itself – that which we are free to do but which is ultimately irrational, 'finally inexplicable' (449); that for which if there are reasons, Foucault prefers to 'leave the question open' (452). Freedom, like revolt, points to a future possibilization, 'that moment when life can no longer be bought, when the authorities can no longer do anything' (449–50). The temporality of revolt is equally ambiguous, for the person who revolts is "outside history" and [yet] in history, because everyone stakes his life, and his death' (450); while the revolution is an historical event, its manner of being lived, its *modus vivendi*, Foucault says, somehow transcends or at least breaks with and yet into history. This transcendence shares something with religious themes – 'promises of the afterlife, time's renewal, anticipation of the savior or the empire of the last days, a reign of pure goodness' (450) – themes that are not dismissible as an 'ideological cloak', he argues, but that imbue the action itself with timelessness and the patina of universal truth. Describing the scene of revolt in Iran, Foucault argues that it was 'religious just as much as it was political' (450), a living revolt that was able to 'follow the rhythm of religious ceremonies and, finally, return to a timeless mode of performance in which secular power is always cursed' (450, translation modified). The life of the revolt shares the depth and grandeur of life itself, performatively identifying it with transcendent religious and mythic truths.

Foucault's Collège de France lectures describe the mythological element present in revolt. But as the revolution in Iran demonstrated, overthrowing the Shah with the help of a mythic and insurrectionary counter-history succeeded only in installing the equally bloody regime of the Ayatollah. In this light, it seems especially difficult to locate an 'ethics of myth' in Foucault's lectures, though I will argue just this. While myth can be read simply under the rubric of Foucauldian 'discourse', or even as 'discipline', it calls to be read in light of Foucault's later work concerning 'ethics' and a 'style of life'.¹¹ Not only is myth an effective discursive principle – such that it must, in some ways, be considered the nexus of power and resistance – but it also holds a certain place of honor in Foucault's work. It is as if Foucault at times departs, rhetorically, from historical description, to endorse a mythic element. After all, Foucault himself is offering us an historical reading, an interpretation that he knows can never be neutral, and so his is a history that must, according to his own terms, eschew a philosophico-juridical author position. We must wonder to what extent Foucault is himself staging his own historico-political counter-history, self-reflexively challenging the dominant discourse, enacting a small revolution in these pages. Historicism and its counter-history, absorbed in local battles and mythic forms, is the antidote to hegemonic discourses that threaten us with their totalitarian theories. 'The point of studying history', Foucault says,

is to discover something that has its own consistence and its own historical situation, and it is not so much of the order of the law as of the order of force, not so much the order of the written word as the order of an equilibrium . . . thanks to something resembling a revolution.¹²

For Foucault, there is most certainly a sense in which myth-making and truth-telling are not mutually exclusive. As Foucault says in an interview published in October 1979:

What I do is a kind of historical fiction. In a sense I know very well that what I say is not true. . . . What I am trying to do is provoke an interference between our reality and the knowledge of our past history. If I succeed, this will have real effects in our present history. My hope is [that] my books become true after they have been written – not before.¹³

To write this interview back into the context of '*Society Must Be Defended*', Foucault hopes that his discourse – in some future perfect tense – will have produced a revolutionary effect, will have entered history,¹⁴ will have defined history in the same way the 'real struggles' of the historico-political discourses he describes achieve their truth only retrospectively, after the fact, where the heteronomous events of the moment, local and unconnected, are sutured together by the red thread of myth. 'Provoking an interference' that will have 'real historical

effects' is the work of critique, which Foucault described that same year as 'akin to the historical practice of revolt, the non-acceptance of a real government, on the one hand, or, on the other, the individual experience of the refusal of government' (73).¹⁵

Myth, critique, and revolt work together in triangular fashion. Perhaps 'myth' is a polemical term and my discussion would best be advanced by a more sober appeal to rhetorical tropes, as Beatrice Hanssen claims when she asserts that Foucault's 'analysis at times seem[s] to come remarkably close to Nietzsche's radical nominalism, according to which truth, even political discourses about the truth, amount to nothing but a volatile, mobile army of tropes' (*Critique of Violence*, 121). Hanssen is uncomfortable with the promiscuity of truth and myth, and her reading is not without substance, for often Foucault speaks with such vocabulary, describing a history that proceeds through the reactivation and reappearance of tropes. For example, Foucault says:

I refer to the reactivation, during the [French] Revolution itself, of a certain number of moments or historical forms that function as, if you like, the splendors of history. Their reappearance in the Revolution's vocabulary, institutions, signs, manifestations, and festivals made it possible to visualize it as a cycle and a return. (*Society Must Be Defended*, 210)

But if the French Revolution gains momentum through the figure of Rome ('the reactivation of Rome'), the figure of Charlemagne, and the temporality of the Champ de Mars festival that he re-established – if all of this is, as Foucault says, an 'implicit historical vocabulary' (210), there is something magical in the 'reactivation' itself, in the vocabulary, in the repetition or the Nietzschean return, and in the very power to foment a revolution which, I am arguing, exceeds the citational force of these figures (or tropes) and duly warrants an appeal to myth-making. A 'mobile army of tropes'? Perhaps, but what makes a cluster of tropes into an armed force, and whence its mobility? Must 'truth' always bear some supplement? Some answers may lie in Foucault's explicit treatment of race and racism in the last lecture, for it is here that an 'ethics of myth' meets its greatest challenge.

While Foucault has claimed that the binary mode by which society is divided is a 'race war', he backs away from assigning a strict primacy to race. Race is, for Foucault, but another instantiation of war as the permanent political order of things. Although racial differences are 'the basic elements that make the war possible, and then ensure its continuation, pursuit and development', these differences are heterogeneous: 'ethnic differences, differences between languages, different degrees of force, vigor, energy, and violence; the differences between savagery and barbarism; the conquest and subjugation of one race by another' (60).

Rather than tell a causal story, in this final lecture Foucault develops his early theory of biopower and the particular way in which the subject, as member of the ‘population’, has since the nineteenth century come to be disciplined and regulated by the state – what Foucault will later call ‘governmentalization’. Here a discourse on race and racism follows from Foucault’s earlier historico-political discourse on struggles, battles, war, and domination.

Ann Laura Stoler’s treatment of race in Foucault is thorough and compelling. She eloquently summarizes Foucault’s treatment of race from its pre-modern to modern forms:

Using a substitutable set of terms (reinscription, recuperation, recovery, reimplantation, encasement), [Foucault] identifies how racial discourse underwent micro- and macro-transformations: from a discourse on war proper to a discourse on war conceived in biological terms; from a power based on discipline to one transfigured into normalization; from a discourse that opposed the state to one annexed by it; from an ancient sovereign right to kill converted into a deadly principle in the modern state’s biopolitical management of life; from racial discourse as the nobility’s defense against the state into a discourse in which the state intervenes to defend society against itself.¹⁶

The early ‘racial discourses’ (Coke, Lilburne, Boulainvilliers, *inter alia*) constitute counter-histories animated by an appeal to myth. In the nineteenth century, however, myth falls out of the equation and the ‘racial discourses’ that appear to be valued by Foucault as insurrectionary counter-histories now become properly *racist discourses* (*Society Must Be Defended*, 65–6). ‘Racism is born at the point when the theme of racial *purity* replaces that of race *struggle*, and when counter-history begins to be converted into a biological racism’ (81).

The theory of biopower allows Foucault to dispense with traditional psychological or ‘scapegoat’ explanations of racism. To repeat Stoler, ‘an ancient sovereign right to kill’ has been converted into a ‘deadly principle in the modern state’s biopolitical management of life’. In Foucault’s words, sovereignty’s old right to ‘take life or let live [*faire mourir et laisser vivre*]’ has now been supplemented and permeated by the modern biopolitical power to ‘make live and let die [*faire vivre et laisser mourir*]’ (241). Racism is thus characterized by ‘a break into the domain of life that is under power’s control: the break between what must live and what must die’ (254). This is no longer the political distinction that Carl Schmitt made between friend and enemy; the decision appears as a biological one, in some sense outside of state control – a supposedly obvious principle to which the state is beholden, and its ultimate apologia for mass murder.¹⁷ Foucault suggests that the modern biologized ‘making live’ and ‘letting die’ stand in a directly proportional relation to each other: ‘the more I – as a species rather than individual

– can live, the stronger I will be’ (255). In this calculus, I am infinitely obliged to make myself live, often at the cost of the life of the other: ‘the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer’ (255).¹⁸ The category of ‘race’ expands when it is biologized, now including degenerates, the mentally ill, deviants, the poor – a ‘subrace’ that saps the strength of the population. A biologized ‘race’ is far greater than common interests and institutions.

Foucault claims, controversially, that ‘racism’ has become an indispensable technique in the functioning of *every* modern state. He understands racism as modeled on war; race is the biologization of war. Eugenics and social Darwinism become justified, he argues, through a biopower that constitutes race as the central biological threat in the face of which ‘society must be defended’. In the current geopolitical context, race travels under the aegis of biology, thus ‘naturalizing’ racial enmity. The current ‘war on terrorism’ is a case in point. Under the banner of this ‘war’, killing is justified (or even ennobled) in the defense of society or civilization. Terrorist and bioterrorist threats constitute both enemy and heartland as inherently biological – the enemy as somehow biologically or naturally evil, and the heartland as a naturally fragile organism, as if the American body politic were the innocent victim of a disease.¹⁹

But is this story a *myth* in Foucault’s sense? What happens to myth in Foucault’s final lectures dealing with race and racism? For the most part, myth falls out of the picture. To the extent that we find it there, it has undergone a transformation. Admittedly, it would be tempting to read the same myth we saw above as now operative in this biologization, since, after all, some persuasive story feeds the racist imaginary as we understand it today. And, reading these last lectures exclusively under the rubric of a Foucauldian ‘discourse’ or ‘discipline’, we might be compelled to do so. But myth is not exactly productive in the manner of a ‘discourse’ or ‘discipline’ as Foucault had deployed these concepts until the mid-1970s. I therefore read Foucault as staunchly refusing to make this equation, and hence these lectures mark an early transition in his thought. In fact, he explicitly says that a ‘demythologization’ has occurred since the nineteenth century, following the last truly ‘mythical’ flourish of the French Revolution.

In his discussion of Nazism, Foucault almost entirely refuses to use the terms ‘myth’ or ‘mythology’. Surely, in the state racism of National Socialism, various animating narratives circulated in the service of state discipline and regulation to produce the sinister norm – ‘something that can be applied to both a body one wishes to discipline and a population one wishes to regularize’ (253). But racism is for Foucault concomitant with a biopower that has come to exceed sovereign right; again, racism

is 'primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die' (254).²⁰ Racism is 'the precondition that makes killing acceptable' (256) or even necessary, but this right is claimed on behalf of a diffuse biopower that ironically represents itself as being for the *preservation* of life (sometimes at all costs, even life itself). The stories told as metaphysical justifications of Nazi programs have their source in biopower; they are in the service of a centralized state discipline and regulation. Their genealogy is not myth, not *mythos*, but a deadly *logos*. In the end, Foucault is asking us to believe that the power of myth never exclusively belongs to a particular individual, regime, society, or *Reich*; like biopower, which is said to exceed sovereign right, myth often appears to exceed biopower. But it is unclear to what extent – and how – myth could stand as a corrective to state biopower and state racism, or whether it could ever secretly collude with them. Indeed, this is the risk.

Foucault characterizes myth as a discourse that circulates freely, undergoes metamorphoses, 'a sort of strategic polyvalence' (76); and while myth deals in eschatological themes, it is also manifest in 'popular scholarship, popular fiction, and cosmo-biological speculations' (76). From an optimistic or, indeed, utopian perspective, myth is a discourse which is an opening, an opening that refuses static and centralizing definitions and allows for perpetual re-creation and incarnation. It refuses to be collapsed into state biopower. In effect, if there is an ethics of myth, it is in myth's potential to open onto something new; it is as *mytho-poiesis*, a creative force that allows for something to be created out of old forms, opening a world, perhaps without the utter destruction or foreclosure of the past and of other possible worlds (as totalitarianism demands). This force might be conceived as a new vitalism, if you will. By *mytho-poiesis* I mean creation through myth, through some other, as opposed to *auto-poiesis*, self-creation; while the myth becomes 'mine', it is never wholly mine or fully under my control – it can always signify in unanticipated ways, it is never co-opted to the hermetic rationality of liberal humanism. For instance, we might adopt and adapt an ancient Greek practice of friendship – today obsolete, but potentially rich with possibilities as we try to craft better relationships, better lives. Foucault never says we *should* do such-and-such; his ethics is not prescriptive. He refrains from policy claims because it is just such a 'governmentalization' of subjects that limits freedom and ethical life. Instead, Foucault's genealogies point to moments of possible rupture, revolt, potentiality. 'Liberty is a *practice*' (354),²¹ he was fond of repeating. Of course, due to the inherent ambiguity of the mythic, this activity is not without risk and, often, great cost.

Because he is doggedly non-prescriptive, Foucault has been criticized

as a relativist and an historicist; whether or not these are terms he will honestly own, here it is striking how he favors the underdog, suggesting that the insurrectionary and emancipatory power of myth acts slyly and almost exclusively in the service of the vanquished. Indeed, we might question here whether Foucault is at last making a strong value judgment in favor of real action; or, is he calling for critique, or even for an arcane *mytho-poietics* his critics will dismiss as politically impotent? Obviously it is not the case that all insurrection is just or wise, that the vanquished are always in the right, or that they are free from state biopower and charges of racism. Nevertheless, Foucault is pointing to some menacing questions. While a program of ethnic cleansing or the military occupation of a foreign territory might both quickly qualify as biopolitical state racism, the blatantly racist components of an oppressed people's efforts to claim an ethnic identity are less evident. Can myth escape liberalism's impasse, torn between its desire to ascribe universal rights to all persons equally, and the individual's conflicting demand for political recognition in his or her uniqueness and singularity (whether this is ethnicity, sexual orientation, race, etc.)? In our day, can an ethnic or political identity still proceed along mythical, as opposed to biopolitical, lines?

Foucault claims that for us myth has become practically obsolete. If we read myth in the spirit of Foucault's ethics, it will thus stand alongside the ancient Greek 'care of the self' as an obsolete practice worthy of resurrecting in our current context. Why? Perhaps because myth fosters an opening, a polyvalent strategy that refuses to be discursively or intellectually contained; a piece of irrationality, a local practice, offering a history counter to the institutionalization and hegemony of scientific discourse and its reign of 'truth'. Myth refuses such closure as we find in scientific discourse or biopolitics; myth allows for a moment of critical self-reflexivity, in which the conditions of truth-telling are questioned and re-questioned. This is the task of critique: to investigate the multiple conditions of truth-telling. In Foucault's words, 'critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth'; moreover, 'critique will be the art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability' ('What Is Critique?', 32).²² Foucault is here effectively refiguring truth as an activity and a form of belief – mythical or not, must we not *believe* these counter-histories, *take* them as true, and, furthermore, *act*? In this regard, Foucault is making a claim about subjectivity, specifically, what it means to be a subject of belief, and not a 'knowing' or rational subject, not a subject of liberal humanism, not a sovereign or juridical subject who demands a universal truth, has a right to know, and enjoys the power with which this knowledge is invested.

An ethical subject will be a subject of critique, of myth, and of action (arguably a form of revolt). Can critique make use of myth? Is there an ethics of myth? In Foucault's late work, ethics concerns 'the way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject' (327),²³ how he or she is, reflexively, 'subjectivated'. In the ethical relation, the relation of self to self, the subject struggles to re-create him- or herself, to become something new, to practice his or her liberty through voluntary insubordination. Hence, the last two volumes of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* are historical analyses, in part reflections on past ethical ways of being – 'styles of life'. As Paul Rabinow observes, '[Foucault's] goal in this analysis was not a "return" to some archaic mode of social order but, rather, to make visible a bygone way of approaching the self and others with what might suggest possibilities for the present' (xxvii).²⁴ In other words, myth is an obsolete or marginal practice that could suggest a *mytho-poietic*, creative, and open-ended aesthetics of existence; the subject, in making him- or herself a work of art, might effectively counter the current modes in which subjects are fabricated. In this way, reading '*Society Must Be Defended*' along with Foucault's later work on ethics, we can begin to consider ways in which an ethical 'practice of self' can facilitate a moment of historical and political intervention – an intervention that is truly new and insurrectionary, rather than hopelessly tied to hegemonic forms and destined only to react against them; an intervention that dares to envisage a possibility that has not yet been thought. The ethical subject is a subject who has, as Foucault says, 'abandoned the juridical model of sovereignty', a model which falsely assumes an originary juridical ascription of rights. This opens the space for myth, for critique, and for revolt in the face of governmentalization; it opens a space in which I can be otherwise, create myself anew, to enter politics and history less constrained by the juridical and regulatory confines of liberal humanism and its reign of 'truth'.

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Notes

- 1 In French, '*Il faut défendre la société*': *Cours au Collège de France, 1976* (Paris: Seuil/Gallimard, 1997). The Course Summary, 'Résumé du cours', originally published at the end of the academic year in the *Annuaire du Collège de France*, was first translated into English by Robert Hurley and published as 'Society Must Be Defended', in Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley *et al.* (New York: The New Press, 1997), pp. 59–65. Similarly, the first two lectures of

this course were also previously translated as ‘Two Lectures’, appearing in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon *et al.* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), pp. 78–108.

- 2 Foucault taught every year but 1977, in which he was on sabbatical.
- 3 François Ewald and Alessandro Fontana, ‘Foreword’, in Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).
- 4 It was Foucault’s request to have no posthumous publications. However, the heirs to his estate have authorized the publication of the Collège de France lectures ‘to meet the great demand for their publication both in France and abroad’ (xiv).
- 5 Translation modified. Although I have very few complaints with David Macey’s translation, I translate *assujettissement* as the slightly less elegant ‘subjectivation’, while Macey says simply ‘subjugation’. *Assujettissement* implies the double manner – both passive and active – in which a subject is produced: both through being *subjected* to something other, and through empowerment as the sovereign subject of one’s own subjective experiences. At stake in this word is the issue of sovereignty. ‘Subjugation’ only captures the first sense of *assujettissement*, and so I believe the inelegance is warranted. Both words variously appear in the English translations of Foucault. At the beginning of these lectures, Foucault will speak of ‘the insurrection of subjectivated knowledges [*savoirs assujettis*]’ (7), and it is important to see that even knowledges themselves will claim a certain agency or insurrectionary subjectivity through their subjectivation.
- 6 Some 50 years before Foucault, Carl Schmitt proposed a somewhat similar thesis, though Foucault does not mention him. In *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt defines the political as determined through the original binary friend–enemy; since this is the given, ‘*status naturalis*’ of things, war is a perpetually real possibility. If there is an ‘original binary’ for Foucault, it is deployed along racial lines (see below). For a discussion of Schmitt and Foucault on liberalism, war, and sovereignty, see Miguel Vatter, ‘La politique comme guerre: Formule pour une démocratie radicale?’, *Majeure* 9 (May–June 2002): 101–15.
- 7 Pasquale Pasquino, Foucault’s friend and translator, distinguishes this distinction as theories of *conquest* as opposed to theories of *contract*, respectively. Cf. ‘Political Theory of War and Peace: Foucault and the History of Modern Political Theory’, trans. Paula Wissing, in *Economy and Society* 22(1) (February 1993): 77–88.
- 8 I define liberal humanism as a Cartesian legacy. It is the belief that ‘the human’ is the primary measure of all things, taking as its founding principle the existence of a coherent, rational self, motivated by an indisputable sense of agency, autonomy, and freedom. Moreover, liberal humanism is a self-foundational ontology because the self gives itself the inalienable *right* to all these things – coherence, rationality, autonomy, agency, individual freedom, etc. – simply by virtue of this self’s *being* a self. Foucault inquires into the terms by which one is both constituted and recognized as a self – what *qualifies* as a self, as ‘human’ – the conditions of which form the proverbial blind spot of liberalism.

- 9 *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978).
- 10 'Useless to Revolt?', in Michel Foucault, *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley, *et al.* (New York: The New Press, 2000), pp. 449–53. An earlier translation by James Bernauer appeared as 'Is it useless to revolt?', in *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 8(1) (Spring 1981): 1–9; reprinted in *Religion and Culture*, ed. Jeremy R. Carette (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 131–4. 'Se soulever' is reflexive, and suggests raising oneself up – a 'revolt' or 'uprising' that has a direction or a higher purpose, though it may lack the organization and epistemological valences of a revolution.
- 11 Beatrice Hanssen has recognized this, stating the necessity to read Foucault's lectures together with his later essay, 'The Subject and Power' (1982). See Chapter 3, 'Power/Force/War: On Foucault's "Society Must Be Defended"', in *Critique of Violence: Between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 97–157. However, I find her reading of Foucault's late philosophy to be somewhat uncharitable. She sees Foucault's attempt 'to sail a course away from the seductive power/force matrix' as largely unsuccessful (122). She therefore reads together power, force, and war as isomorphic – a respectable critical stance, but not a very productive one, in my opinion. She turns to 'The Subject and Power' only to show how even here Foucault 'held fast to his understanding of power as strategy' (149).
- 12 'Society Must Be Defended', 192. It is worth comparing a few lines from Georges Sorel, for they are remarkably similar in their emphasis on revolution: 'The revolutionary myths which exist at the present time are almost pure . . . they are not descriptions of things but expressions of a will to act' (*Reflections on Violence*, ed. Jeremy Jennings [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], p. 28). Foucault does not mention Sorel, but a longer treatment of Sorel and, specifically, his theory of myth, is a lacuna in Foucault scholarship.
- 13 Michel Foucault, *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1961–1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Lysa Hochroth and John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), p. 301.
- 14 In this same interview, Foucault claims that his book was instrumental in several prison riots in France.
- 15 Michel Foucault, 'What Is Critique?' [1979], *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth, trans. Lysa Hochroth (New York: Semiotext(e), 1998).
- 16 Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 89. In relation to 'Society Must Be Defended', see especially Chapter 3, 'Toward a Genealogy of Racisms: The 1976 Lectures at the Collège de France'.
- 17 In Schmitt's *Political Theology*, he argues that a 'theological' element is the ultimate political determinant – i.e. politics is a secularized theology, and thus incorporates an element of faith. Schmitt's distinction between friend–enemy is, in Miguel Vatter's words, 'determined as a function of that friend/enemy ambivalence which is founded on an absolute alternative determined by faith'. Vatter compares Foucault's position: 'For Foucault,

- the contrary is true: the work of a culture is not to eliminate the friend/enemy ambivalence, nor to determine it in an absolute manner, but to render it as fluid, as unstable, and as mutable as possible' ('La politique comme guerre', 110–11, translation mine). As Vatter demonstrates, Foucault eschews Schmitt's determinism, preferring instead that we open possibilities for a subject of politics and history, which is possible because myth appeals to a domain outside of juridical and philosophical purview.
- 18 Foucault says: 'When I say "killing", I obviously do not mean simply murder as such, but also every form of indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on' (256).
- 19 Significantly, the terrorist 'enemy' is everywhere and yet nowhere, potentially ubiquitous and yet not locatable – an adversary that shares many of the traits of biopower itself.
- 20 Foucault: 'This excess of biopower appears when it becomes technologically and politically possible for man not only to manage life but to make it proliferate, to create living matter, to build the monster, and, ultimately, to build viruses that cannot be controlled and that are universally destructive' (254). Today, biotechnology and techniques of disciplining and surveillance mesh seamlessly, each informing the other. The US State Department has recently announced that it will employ 'biologically inspired algorithms for agent control' in DARPA's new Information Awareness Office's post-9/11 'Total Information Awareness' agenda. See <http://www.darpa.mil/iao/index.htm> [accessed 01 February 2003]. More recently, in January 2004 the US Immigration and Naturalization Service implemented 'biometric' controls on some visitors to the US, including photographing and fingerprinting.
- 21 'Space, Knowledge, and Power', in *Power*.
- 22 The next sentence reads: 'Critique would essentially insure the desubjugation [desubjectivation] of the subject in the context of what we could call, in a word, the politics of truth'.
- 23 'The Subject and Power', in *Power*.
- 24 Paul Rabinow, 'Introduction', in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley *et al.* (New York: The New Press, 1997).