

## Practicing Criticism

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*Conducted by Didier Eribon for the French newspaper Libération this interview, granted shortly after the 1981 election of Socialist President François Mitterrand, uncovers the Foucauldian imperative to place thought before the "sacrilization of the social." To practice criticism demands not only a liberation of thought, but also an intellectual activity that makes conflicts visible through the action of theory. If transformation is to be achieved, it can only be realized in a permanent state of criticism. This interview was published under the title "Is it really important to think?" on May 30–31, 1981. The translation is by Alan Sheridan.*

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D.E. On election night we asked you for your first reactions. You didn't want to make any comment. But now you feel more at ease to speak . . .

FOUCAULT Indeed, I consider that voting in itself is a form of action. It is then up to the government to act in its turn. Now the time has certainly come to react to what is beginning to be done. Anyway, I believe people are grown up enough to make up their own minds when they vote and then to celebrate if they feel so inclined. Indeed it seems to me that they managed very well.

D.E. What, then, are your reactions today?

FOUCAULT I'm struck by three things. Over the last twenty years at least, a series of questions have been raised within society itself. And for a long time these questions have not had a place in "serious" institutional politics.

The socialists seem to have been the only ones to grasp the reality of those problems and to react to them — which

probably has something to do with their victory.

Secondly, in relation to these problems (I am thinking above all of the administration of justice or the question of the immigrants), the first steps or the first declarations have been absolutely at one with what one might call a "left-wing logic" — the logic for which Mitterrand was elected.

Thirdly, which is more remarkable, the measures taken do not conform to majority opinion. Neither on the death penalty, nor on the question of the immigrants have the declared choices of the government followed majority public opinion.

This gives the lie to all that has been said about the pointlessness of these questions that had been debated over the past ten or fifteen years; all that has been said about the non-existence of a left-wing logic in the way a government is run; all that has been said about how, in the first measures to be taken by the new government, it had given into popular feeling. On nuclear weapons, the immigrants, and the law, the government has anchored its decision in problems that really have been seen in reference to a logic that went against majority opinion. And I'm sure the majority approves this way of proceeding, if not the measures themselves. In saying this, I'm not saying that things have been done and now we can sit back. Those first steps are not a charter, but nevertheless they are more than symbolic gestures.

Compare them with what Giscard did immediately after his election: a handshake to the prisoners. It was a purely symbolic gesture addressed to an electorate that was not his. Today we have the first set of effective measures that may run counter to the feelings of a part of the electorate, but which mark the style of government.

D.E. Indeed it does seem that a quite new way of governing is being established.

FOUCAULT Yes, that's an important point and one that may have appeared for the first time with Mitterrand's electoral victory. It seems to me that this election has been felt by many people as a sort of victory, a modification in the relationship between those who govern and the governed. Not that the governed have taken the place of those who govern. After all, what has happened is a shift within the political class. We are entering into a government by party,

with all the dangers that this involves, and we should never forget that.

But the question that is raised by this change is whether it is possible to establish between those who govern and the governed a relationship that is not one of obedience, but one in which work will play an important role.

D.E. You mean it will be possible to work with this government?

FOUCAULT We must escape from the dilemma of being either for or against. After all, it is possible to face up to a government and remain standing. To work with a government implies neither subjection nor total acceptance. One may work with it and yet be restive. I even believe that the two things go together.

D.E. After Michel Foucault the critic, are we now going to see Michel Foucault the reformist? After all, the reproach was often made that the criticism made by intellectuals leads to nothing.

FOUCAULT First I'll answer the point about "that leads to nothing." There are hundreds and thousands of people who have worked for the emergence of a number of problems that are now on the agenda. To say that this work produced nothing is quite wrong. Do you think that twenty years ago people were considering the problems of the relationship between mental illness and psychological normality, the problem of prison, the problem of medical power, the problem of the relationship between the sexes, and so on, as they are doing today?

Furthermore, there are no reforms as such. Reforms are not produced in the air, independently of those who carry them out. One cannot not take account of those who will have the job of carrying out this transformation.

And, then, above all, I believe that an opposition can be made between critique and transformation, "ideal" critique and "real" transformation.

A critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest.

We must free ourselves from the sacrilization of the social

as the only reality and stop regarding as superfluous something so essential in human life and in human relations as thought. Thought exists independently of systems and structures of discourse. It is something that is often hidden, but which always animates everyday behavior. There is always a little thought even in the most stupid institutions; there is always thought even in silent habits.

Criticism is a matter of flushing out that thought and trying to change it: to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed, to see that what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such. Practicing criticism is a matter of making facile gestures difficult.

In these circumstances, criticism (and radical criticism) is absolutely indispensable for any transformation. A transformation that remains within the same mode of thought, a transformation that is only a way of adjusting the same thought more closely to the reality of things can merely be a superficial transformation.

On the other hand, as soon as one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult, and quite possible.

It is not therefore a question of there being a time for criticism and a time for transformation, nor people who do the criticism and others who do the transforming, those who are enclosed in an inaccessible radicalism and those who are forced to make the necessary concessions to reality. In fact I think the work of deep transformation can only be carried out in a free atmosphere, one constantly agitated by a permanent criticism.

D.E. But do you think the intellectual must have a programmatic role in this transformation?

FOUCAULT A reform is never only the result of a process in which there is conflict, confrontation, struggle, resistance . . .

To say to oneself at the outset: what reform will I be able to carry out? That is not, I believe, an aim for the intellectual to pursue. His role, since he works specifically in the realm of thought, is to see how far the liberation of thought can make those transformations urgent enough for people to want to carry them out and difficult enough to carry out for them to be profoundly rooted in reality.

It is a question of making conflicts more visible, of making them more essential than mere confrontations of interests or mere institutional immobility. Out of these conflicts, these confrontations, a new power relation must emerge, whose first, temporary expression will be a reform. If at the base there has not been the work of thought upon itself and if, in fact, modes of thought, that is to say modes of action, have not been altered, whatever the project for reform, we know that it will be swamped, digested by modes of behavior and institutions that will always be the same.

D.E. After taking part in a number of movements, you have somewhat withdrawn lately. Are you now going to participate in such movements once again?

FOUCAULT Whenever I have tried to carry out a piece of theoretical work, it has been on the basis of my own experience, always in relation to processes I saw taking place around me. It is because I thought I could recognize in the things I saw, in the institutions with which I dealt, in my relations with others, cracks, silent shocks, malfunctionings . . . that I undertook a particular piece of work, a few fragments of autobiography.

I'm not an activist who has retired from the fray and who would now like to return to service. My mode of work hasn't changed much; but what I do expect from it is that it will continue to change me more.

D.E. People say you are fairly pessimistic. Hearing you, I would say instead you were rather optimistic.

FOUCAULT There's an optimism that consists in saying that things couldn't be better. My optimism would consist rather in saying that so many things can be changed, fragile as they are, bound up more with circumstances than necessities, more arbitrary than self-evident, more a matter of complex, but temporary, historical circumstances than with inevitable anthropological constants . . . You know, to say that we are much more recent than we think isn't a way of taking the whole weight of history on our shoulders. It's rather to place at the disposal of the work that we can do on ourselves the greatest possible share of what is presented to us as inaccessible.