

Foucault and Psychiatric Power after *Madness and Civilization*^{1*}

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Pouvoir psychiatrique, Michel Foucault's course at the Collège de France in 1973-74, is required reading as a key to understanding a highly important period in Foucault's intellectual itinerary. Without the slightest hesitation, we could describe it as his "leap into practice", or, better still, as the process of political involvement that Foucault made in the wake of 1968 by coming closer to (and creating) movements contesting the norm and disciplinary institutions. It is not at all surprising to see that, once again, it is psychiatry – but also the legal apparatus – that triggered Foucault's involvement in struggles. We are even tempted to say that this is one of the numerous long-term consequences provoked by the publication of *Histoire de la folie*, that always remains a basic point of reference. In *Les anormaux* (1974-75) Foucault returned to what was already in *Dits et écrits* or in other works such as *Pierre Rivière* – a position that had seemed obvious for years: his inquiry into the history of psychiatry (power, knowledge, institutions, statements) was a thread that ran forcefully through all his work, to the extent of enabling us to consider it, quite appropriately, as one of the most fundamental themes in his work. With the publication of *Pouvoir psychiatrique* Foucault added – if he would forgive us the Darwinian allusion – the missing link in the chain of evolution of this thinking. The basic tenets of this course had already existed, it is true, and had been widely circulated in Italy; Foucault had proposed these himself (in a revised version) to Franco Basaglia in a collective publication that had major impact in the 1970s².

Already when Foucault was giving his course, we need to recognize, he was passing through a very productive phase, one in which he was also putting himself into question. We can see in this all the complexity of the relation between theory and practice, between philosophical passion and political involvement. It is clearly the questions about psychiatry that led Foucault turn towards militancy; this can be deduced from the numerous interviews during these years, particularly from what he declared in 1971³.

Independently of this "new" interest, the law was already looming on Foucault's intellectual horizon and led during these years to his overt militancy with the creation of the *Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons* (GIP). But we must not lose sight of the anti-psychiatry movements which were emerging in Italy with Basaglia (who nevertheless refused the label of "anti-psychiatry"⁴), in England with Laing and Cooper, in the United States with Szasz and to some extent in France; these were a central point of reference. The movements seemed to remind Foucault of the extent to which the traditional role of the intellectual was outdated when limited to teaching and writing, and how it was necessary to move in the direction of political practice. As widely recognized, after 1968 it was precisely his relations with the psychiatric protest movements to which Foucault would devote much of his intellectual energy and involvement. It is at the least through this relationship that he began to doubt the effectiveness of his intellectual experience, to the extent of having the premonition of an urgent need to change his itinerary.

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² F. Basaglia, F. Ongaro Basaglia (dir.), *Crimini di pace* [...]. Foucault's contribution is entitled "La maison des fous"; also in *Dits et écrits*, n° 146, vol. 2, pp. 693-698).

³ M. Foucault, "Un problème m'intéresse depuis longtemps, [...]", in *Dits et écrits*, n° 95, vol 2, pp. 208-209.

⁴ F. Basaglia, *Conferenze brasiliane*, p. 153 and pp. 184-185.

Anti-psychiatry was the new event that changed the focus introduced in the *Histoire de la folie*; his course on psychiatric power heralded the need to be confronted with this new experience. This was what stimulated him to return to his *Histoire de la folie* project, while changing its orientation and by comparing it with the projects that others - especially those in the anti-psychiatry movement - were elaborating, based in large part on his book. They saw in the *Histoire* a historical justification for the political actions born of their own ideas and initiatives.

Foucault's project

If the *Histoire de la folie* is a fundamental reference, it is also true that in itself it does not really show the significance of what Foucault brought to the political debate on the disciplinary functioning of psychiatry. Taken alone, it does not provide an adequate account of the relation between contemporary knowledge/power and its own history. There are two reasons for this.

Firstly, Foucault himself had insisted that his history was essentially not a history of psychiatry but of madness itself, before it was caught up in the net of knowledge⁵. In the 1961 preface (omitted from subsequent editions), he clearly stated the need to steer clear of any reference to any idea of psychiatric "truth"⁶. And, for Foucault, this was precisely the issue behind which and through which the major difficulty was located, since what was needed was a language freed of the straight-jacket of scientific terminology and of social or moral options⁷, so it would be possible to reconstruct the experience of madness at the moment that it separated itself from the language of reasoning. This does not mean that one can refer to a sort of original condition, a primitive, pure form of madness. Foucault was aware that writing the history of madness meant studying the whole historical nexus (notions, institutions, legal and policing measures, scientific concepts) that held the primitive state of madness as captive⁸. But it is also true that the *Histoire de la folie* concluded with an analysis of representations, that is, the image that people had of madness in the Classical Age⁹. Twelve years later, in devoting his whole course to psychiatric power, Foucault returned to where he had left off, while at the same time changing the object of his analysis: no longer was it a question of the representations of the mentalities and perceptions of madness, but now it became an analysis of the apparatus of psychiatric power itself, in the sense of how it functioned as an authority producing statements (*énoncés*) and discourse and, as a result, representations of madness. In other words, the principle of his research was reversed and his interest began to focus on psychiatry and contiguous fields, such as psychology, psychoanalysis, pedagogy, criminology, and so on.

Secondly, Foucault altered the temporal axis of his inquiry. In the *Histoire de la folie*, his focus was on the Classical Age (more precisely from 1657, when the General Hospital was instituted and when the *grand renfermement* of the poor began in France, up to 1794, when Pinel freed the inmates chained up at Bicêtre). This constituted a kind of inaugural historical moment or a passage between two eras and two mentalities. But in *Le pouvoir psychiatrique*, he argued that he was more interested in the 19th and 20th centuries, indeed in the contemporary era. This did not stop him from providing a description of the religious communities of the Middle Ages nor the scene of the treatment of George III. But he still focused particularly on the contemporary situation and he traced here, at least in part, the affinities between the present and the old system of psychiatric power¹⁰.

⁵ M. Foucault, "Préface", in *Dits et écrits*, n° 4, vol 1, p. 164.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁹ M. Foucault, *Le pouvoir psychiatrique* [...], p. 14.

¹⁰ J. Lagrange, "Situation du cours", in M. Foucault, *Le pouvoir psychiatrique* [...], p. 357.

That this involved a change in focus is unquestionable. Just consider the numerous times that Foucault, following the publication of *Histoire de la folie*, had had to defend himself from the severe and often mischievous critics that accused him of being a *psychiatricide*, intent on destroying everything psychiatry stood for and of having reduced mental illness to no more than just a cultural phenomenon¹¹. He replied to his critics with appropriate humility that he was not talking about the present but only of the perception of madness in the Classical Age; he did not understand why contemporary psychiatrists would feel threatened by the book. In the 1970s, Foucault stopped being cautious and chose to speak out openly about the contemporary context. This constituted a crucial change which shows us the real importance of the course at the Collège de France on psychiatric power.

The anti-psychiatry projects

There was first of all, during this pause, the way in which *Histoire de la folie* was received. The initial reaction was rough, since the book proved to be difficult to read.¹² For the first few years, the book sold poorly and Foucault doubted the validity of his own language¹³ and ended up, completely unexpectedly, authorizing its publication in a paperback edition, with a shorter text than the original edition. Unfortunately, it was this paperback edition that was translated into English in 1965 with, moreover, a different title: *Madness and Civilization*. It was this translation that began to circulate within the emerging English-speaking circle of the anti-psychiatry movement¹⁴. But it was also this version that was at the origin of his success. In France, the work was initially adopted in academic circles, being read as a doctoral thesis, an academic work on a philosophical subject, a theoretical project on how to conceive of a discourse on madness, which had nothing to do with psychiatry, psychology or institutional practices. So, particularly at the beginning, the book was inscribed in an academic rather than a practical register, in line with the epistemological research of the time¹⁵. It was only later, in 1968, that it would be seen as the *porte-parole* of anti-psychiatry and severely attacked by the French psychiatric establishment, in the ways we have already alluded to.

In England it was very different: the book started to circulate, was well received, and “used” in the community of psychiatrists and psychoanalysts in which Ronald Laing and David Cooper, among others, were developing their leftist thinking, in strong opposition to classical psychiatry. This opened up new, alternative practices, such as the running of Pavilion 21, which had already begun in 1962 in a London psychiatric hospital, or creating household communities, protected housing outside the asylums, among them Kingsley Hall, where Mary Barnes had lived - Foucault reported on these developments in his 1973 course. English anti-psychiatry rejected traditional science, accusing it of have violent consequences on the treatment of madness – within a more generalized and repressive ideology exercised by the society, the family and other institutions. This had to be opposed by a liberating dialectic. English anti-psychiatry also defended the idea that schizophrenia was a creative and purifying journey, which had to be protected from medicalization and allowed to bloom as sublime experience.

For Laing, Cooper, and Esterson and all those who identified with this movement, Foucault’s book became an extraordinary tool providing a support for experiments still at the

¹¹ D. Eribon, *Michel Foucault [...]*, p. 151.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹⁴ This work is in fact included in the collective publication edited by Ronald Laing, *Studies in existentialism and phenomenology*, with a preface by David Cooper (cf. *ibid.*, p. 148).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

embryonic stage. The text was attributed, not without some exaggeration, a political value which clearly it did not have when it first came out. Foucault was even quoted for claims he had never intended to say. But he understood that this was inevitable, and was part of a book's uncontrollable destiny and to the imprecise definition of what constitutes an author.¹⁶ Reading a work does not just consist of criticizing it, but it may also generate unconditional and sometimes excessive infatuation, resulting in interpretations that may completely distort the author's intentions. It is neither possible nor legitimate to stop any such proliferation; the text must stand as it is without the author exercising his tyranny and prescribing his law.¹⁷

But in the 1971 interview, Foucault tells us that this historical work in the book was in the process of generating a practical outcome, of which he was somewhat envious¹⁸. This is proof of his *rapport* with anti-psychiatry - changing so fast and becoming so controversial, at one moment characterized by Foucault adopting a certain distance, then associating with the new movement, always underpinned, in any case, by his subtle curiosity, if not by his very strong fascination broaching on jealousy.¹⁹ Foucault felt himself being short-circuited by the anti-psychiatry struggles, as if his ideas had been a theoretical detonator causing the practices to explode, producing an unanticipated political effect, one which he had not been able to foresee, and which made him into a front-line protagonist in the struggle. His militant involvement emerged some years later, at the beginning of the 1970s, with the problem of prisons. It all happened as if Foucault, in this interview, was staggering under the blow and, because of these new practices, was forced to reflect upon his theoretical interest in madness.

But there remained a number of basic perplexities. He did not at all, for instance, share the central thesis of anti-psychiatry - the idea of a repressive power that crushes the so-called freedom of madness. Certainly, this was a fascinating image and one which had its disciples, but it failed to take into account the complexity of the specific functioning of psychiatric power, and it was precisely this that became the focus of Foucault's 1973 course²⁰.

The position of anyone who says he is opposing the strategies of psychiatric power, if he is only contesting the violence contained within that power, is suspect and, to say the least, naïve. The image of a struggle which would provide freedom from the injustices of repressive authority clearly ends up by coming too close to reproducing the hagiographic image that, strangely, psychiatry has revived as its founding myth: Pinel's unchaining of the insane. As if one could change the dynamics of the functioning of this power simply by eliminating what has remained of coercion and brutality. Seen in its microphysic, with its micropolitical ramifications, power is always violent, but at the time, rational²¹.

In the *Histoire de la folie*, Foucault had already used notions such as *violence* and *institution*, but, in the context of psychiatric power, these no longer seemed adequate²². Most of the anti-psychiatry and psychological analyses that had preceded his book continued to be made and showed no sign of being abandoned. Foucault "reproached" anti-psychiatry therefore of wanting to continue asking the question of the history of psychiatry exclusively through these notions, in an

¹⁶ Cf. M. Foucault, "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur ?", in *Dits et écrits*, n° 69, vol 1, pp. 789-821.

¹⁷ M. Foucault, *Histoire de la folie* [...], p. 10.

¹⁸ M. Foucault, "Un problème m'intéresse depuis longtemps, [...]", in *Dits et écrits*, n° 95, vol 2, p. 209.

¹⁹ D. Eribon, *Michel Foucault* [...], p. 151; cf. also P. Di Vittorio, *Foucault e Basaglia* [...].

²⁰ Cf. M. Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault", in *Dits et écrits*, n° 192, vol 3, pp. 148-149.

²¹ M. Foucault, "Foucault étudie la raison d'Etat", in *Dits et écrits*, n° 272, vol 3, p. 803.

²² M. Foucault, *Le pouvoir psychiatrique* [...], p. 15.

“institutionalist”²³ perspective, focusing on the institution as a place in which violence was practiced. There was no doubting the horror of the violence, certainly. But this was not, in Foucault’s eyes, the principal problem. In bringing the brutality of psychiatric power and the suppression of individual rights to fore-front, one ends up masking the real historical question about psychiatry: the relationship between psychiatric practice and the discourse on truth.²⁴

“As for the hysterics, these famous men and these dear hysterics”²⁵

If Foucault seemed to be very interested in anti-psychiatry movements it is not, clearly, because of the way they posed the question about psychiatric power. This power is affected by a particular ideology, a particular Freudo-Marxism which chose as its battle-horse the concepts of “ideology” and “repression”; it reflects a purely legal conception of power, founded on sovereignty and interdiction, on right defeating violence. But this conception is completely inadequate when in elucidating the complex links created between the force of domination and the potential for revolt, between flexible control and disguised subordination, between directing consciousness and constitution the self.

This leads us to a crucial scene in the Foucault’s course on psychiatric power, which he described in the last lesson. It is the issue of the subtle relationship between Charcot and his hysterics, of the dissimulation of truth and the sudden explosion of truth. Sexuality is at the core of this perverse relationship, first misunderstood and minimized, then recognized in hushed tones, finally exorcised and ridiculed. At a fashionable reception, Charcot confided ironically to a colleague that there was indeed a link between hysteria and sexuality.²⁶ Freud, who was there at the same time, was astonished, almost paralysed. He asked himself: If he knows that, why doesn’t he come out and say it?²⁷ Charcot would forget about this link between sexuality and hysteria - before returning to it some years later when he developed his theory of the sexual etiology of neuroses.

These “infamous men and dear hysterics” are, as Foucault calls them, anti-psychiatry’s real militants²⁸ for they were the first capable of opening up a space to escape from the truth imposed in the psychiatric hospitals. For this reason, they represent the defense against the diagnosis of *dementia*, against a classification of madness understood in terms of loss of capacities as a feebleness of the mind, in short, against madness reduced to a reality imposed by psychiatric power – a sick person without symptoms, without crises, without violence, totally subjugated to the discipline of the asylum, not only for the docility of their behavior but equally for the absence of any specific pathological manifestations. It was a matter of being just the “poor mad man”, nothing more than that! All his reality is there, in the asylum that was constructed for him, and where his would live out his destiny. The hysterics opposed the psychiatric abuse of power by exaggerating all their symptoms and by exhibiting, with an unheard-of magnificence, the spectacle of their sickness. For Foucault, this was not a sign of disease, but a phenomenon of struggle.²⁹

The answer of the mad to psychiatric power was to simulate madness within madness.³⁰ By doing this, they created a front-line of resistance to psychiatric power: these were its first militants.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 253. (Our translation)

²⁶ M. Foucault, *Le pouvoir psychiatrique [...]*, p. 323.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

It was the insidious way the mad could ask psychiatric power - that sought to impose its own reality - the question about truth.³¹ Could we then conceive of a history of psychiatry revolving around the mad, instead of around the psychiatrist and his knowledge? Of course this would be difficult if it were to start with hysterics, for their front of resistance relied on offering up the body - and it is precisely through the body that they unconsciously gave medicine the opportunity for self-renewal. In attempting to escape the power of the asylum, with its diagnostic abuse of dementia and the excessive medicalization of madness, they ended up by hyper-medicalizing their own condition, which, as Charcot had admitted, was less a matter of illness than a question of sexuality.

If the history of anti-psychiatry began when Charcot produced the hysterical crises that he described³², 80 years before Laing, Cooper, and Basaglia, one can say that these beginnings were ambiguous : the ambiguity of Charcot, the master of madness who, in attempting to make madness submit to the definitive and uncontested power of psychiatry, ended up compromising this same power by provoking the suspicion of contagion and artifice; also the ambiguity of the hysterics themselves who, in trying to elude this power, provided it with the possibility of regeneration in other forms. This is why Freud was not an innocent observer of this scene. Foucault fully understood, at a time when psychoanalysis was triumphant, that it was not solely a question of transforming and adopting the powers of the medical figure, in other words his trimmings of moral probity and wisdom, which predated his knowledge, that a status of almost divine omnipotence would be conferred on him.³³ Psychoanalysis did not just take up and exploit this role, on the contrary, it allowed psychiatry to reconstruct itself as medical truth by orienting its research toward a new object of study: sexuality. This, for Foucault, was our “great misfortune”.³⁴

Freud’s *good genie, bad genie*, which managed to get us to submit to the “austere monarchy of sex” and made us believe that “our liberation is in the balance”.³⁵ Believing that we can be liberated is nothing but a pure illusion. You don’t free yourself of psychiatry by fighting against the violence, the institution or the moral doctrine: saying Yes to sex does not mean saying No to power. But liberation is a long and difficult process. It is a struggle against the pathologization of daily life, against the dissemination of a medical truth controlling all discourse. What disturbs Foucault the most in psychiatry is the extension of the category of the illness beyond the walls of the institutional asylum.³⁶ So the struggle is not just against the psychiatric institution itself but also in recognizing its tentacles throughout the fabric of our society, the dissemination of what Foucault called “the Psy function, in other words the function that is psychiatric, psychopathological, psycho-sociological, psycho-criminological, psychoanalytic, etc.”, all related to discourse, the institution and the psychological individual.³⁷

The inmates in Gorizia

It is likely that the position taken by Basaglia, and more generally the position of the Italian movement of institutional psychiatry, provided Foucault with new elements for reflection. Basaglia repeated tirelessly to those who did not share his battle that identifying the enemy against which one

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 347.

³³ Cf. M. Foucault, *Histoire de la folie [...]*, p. 623-632.

³⁴ M. Foucault, *Le pouvoir psychiatrique [...]*, p. 325.

³⁵ M. Foucault, *History of Sexuality, vol. I [...]*, p. 159. On this point, see also J. Derrida, in E. Roudinesco (Ed.), *Penser la folie [...]*, pp. 139-195.

³⁶ M. Foucault, “Par-delà le bien et le mal”, in *Dits et écrits*, n° 98, vol 2, p. 232.

³⁷ M. Foucault, *Le pouvoir psychiatrique [...]*, p. 86. (Our translation) Cf. also F. Castel, R. Castel, A. Lovell, *La société psychiatrique avancée*. (Our translation)

can fight (the social system, capitalism, etc.) in fact interferes with the real motive of the struggle.³⁸ Action had to be taken on a daily basis and precisely focused, and the passage to a general policy could only be achieved in our own particular field of competence.³⁹

In other words, already in the 1970s, at Gorizia then at Trieste, Basaglia had understood that there was a contradiction between the negation and the exercise of institutional power. The new professionals, coming out of the student uprisings, often only gave weight to one of the two poles of this contradiction, that of negation, omitting to consider that this was already accepted as an organization of power and an ideology of knowledge that could not just be disregarded. Closing oneself behind this negation to avoid any compromise in the daily running of the total institution is not enough. Just as it is not enough merely to advocate the general freedom of madness without asking oneself about the every-day rules of the functioning of the psychiatric machine. This is one of the points of discord, for both Basaglia and Foucault, with English anti-psychiatry, based as it was on the principles of liberation, sometimes vague and sterilely anti-scientific, as a way of escaping the institutional contradiction. This should rather have been at the centre of the dialectic, all the more so because English anti-psychiatry did not, in the end, manage to influence concretely either the specific practices or the general policies of psychiatry.

The Italian position cannot therefore be neatly packaged with other anti-psychiatry experiments and it is not by accident if, when he was asked whether the experience created with GIP could extend to psychiatric hospitals in France, Foucault answered that he was continually preoccupied with the psychiatrization of everyday life. He added that the struggle of patients against the institutional asylum would be much harder to advance as a collective and political refusal of the system. He doubted that the so-called “diseased”, subjugated to segregation in the asylum, could protest their exclusion insofar as they are judged to be “mentally ill”.⁴⁰ Psychiatric patients clearly do not have the same options as the prison inmates of the GIP, and their struggle appears more difficult although, as Foucault recognized, Basaglia had tried experiments of this kind in Italy.⁴¹ This interview dates from 1971, as we said, and it is quite possible that Foucault had read *L'institution en négation*, which had just been translated into French. Doubtless, he had understood the difference between the experiments of Basaglia and the others (Laing, Cooper, Szasz, the French experiences, etc.). He understood that the purpose of the Gorizia meetings was not therapeutic but political.⁴²

The Gorizia meetings were organized to protest and contest, and to ensure that the discourse produced would be transferred from the psychiatrist to the interned. Therapy starts from the moment that the interned have an opportunity to express themselves, particularly those who oppose such internment, since one has to give them back the possibility of still expressing the aggression which is their only resource against institutional annihilation.⁴³ Here we see a complete reversal of the clinic and of the role that the social organization attributes to the doctor: to count on aggression, on the “strength of madness”, which has historically been the target of the repressive intervention of psychiatry.⁴⁴ Not to suffocate it, but to enable the interned, through this aggression, to rediscover their subjectivity in acts of resistance to scientific rationalization. Siding with the aggression of the

³⁸ F. Basaglia, F. Ongaro Basaglia (Eds.), *Crimini di pace [...]*, p. 67.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

⁴² F. Basaglia, *L'istituzione negata [...]*, pp. 30-31.

⁴³ F. Basaglia, “La comunità terapeutica come base [...]”, in *Scritti*, vol 1, p. 278.

⁴⁴ *Le pouvoir psychiatrique [...]*, p. 10.

interned is the only way to break with the authoritarian and paternalistic *rappports* of institutionalization⁴⁵, the only way to achieve a *rapport* that is egalitarian.⁴⁶

The infamous men

In January 1976, when he began his course “*Society must be defended*” (“*Il faut défendre la société*”) Foucault returned to the anti-psychiatry struggles to demonstrate the novelty and strength of “local” critical discourse in contradistinction to so-called exact science or, for that matter, the all-embracing theories like Marxism or psychoanalysis. The anti-psychiatry struggles were the prototype of an insurrection of subjugated knowledge, which made concrete action of resistance to disciplinary power possible⁴⁷.

Foucault then discovered a surprising effect: the individual who opposes and resists power is just the principal effect of this same power or, at least, the opportunity which allows power to assert itself and to keep going in the world. Yet if power is really a procedure of the construction of subjects, if the *rappports* of power can only exist in function of the multiple points of resistance⁴⁸, is there anything beyond what power says and does? When Foucault talks about “centers of resistance” - “*foyers de résistance*” - at least up until *La volonté de savoir*, he does not really explain if and how these are constituted, beyond being in contact with power.⁴⁹ This is perhaps the issue on which he questioned himself the most in the last years of his life; it is also the reason why he decided to radically modify the *Histoire de la sexualité* project, after publication of the first volume.⁵⁰ This was the discovery of subjectivization as a process of resisting all objectivization and that going beyond the subject considered as a substance, an identity, or a person, and toward production of a means of existing.

It was in the light of this that Foucault introduced a possible new figure in the resistance to power. We can understand this new figure through the fragmented histories of minor and widely-dispersed insurrections.⁵¹ This is the history of lost lives, sometimes of individual acts that have been forgotten, of fragments of facts from the past, of reports so brief and exemplary that they seem to belong less to life than to literature. “The Life of Infamous Men” (“*La vie des hommes infâmes*”), a short work of the mid-1970s bears the signs of this. It was the fruit of a long exploration by Foucault in the internment archives of the *Hôpital Général* and of the Bastille, a project which had been ongoing from the *Histoire de la folie* onwards and which would lead to an anthology of the *lettres de cachet*.⁵² These are short but stunning and disturbing histories. Take the story of Mathurin Milan, who was assigned to the Charenton hospital on 31 August 1707, whose madness consisted of hiding from his family to lead an obscure life in the country-side⁵³. Or that of Jean-Antoine Touzard who was confined at the Château de Bicêtre on 21 April 1701 after being found guilty of committing sodomy and being an atheist.⁵⁴

⁴⁵ F. Basaglia, “La distruzione dell’ospedale psichiatrico [...]”, in *Scritti*, vol 1, p. 257.

⁴⁶ F. Basaglia, “Potere e istituzionalizzazione [...]”, in *Scritti*, vol 1, p. 293.

⁴⁷ M. Foucault, “*Il faut défendre la société*” [...], pp. 8-9.

⁴⁸ M. Foucault, *La volonté de savoir* [...], p. 126.

⁴⁹ G. Deleuze, *Pourparlers* [...], p. 148.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁵¹ M. Foucault, *La volonté de savoir* [...], p. 126.

⁵² A. Farges & M. Foucault, *Le désordre des familles* [...].

⁵³ M. Foucault, “La vie des hommes infâmes”, in *Dits et écrits*, n° 198, vol 3, p. 237.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 237-238.

But where do all these infamous lives come from? For Foucault, these men are only on record because of a few “terrible words” thrown at them to disgrace them.⁵⁵ Is this another case of the delineation of power, of the incapacity of going beyond it, of going beyond struggling against one’s own strength? No. This time there is something more. Foucault was writing here in the first person, even more explicitly than he had ever done before, writing of his “terror”, of the “vibration” he felt in making contact with these words, words that had resurfaced precipitously after centuries of silence and within which a man’s destiny has been decided.⁵⁶ It is Foucault himself who is there, directly confronting these stories and visibly disturbed.⁵⁷ It is strangely shocking that he was so affected, he who should have become accustomed through the *lettres de cachet*, the police reports, the royal orders. Years after the *Histoire de la folie*, the encounter with these fossilized lives in the archives shakes him again.⁵⁸

Why did these stories, which belong neither to history nor to literature, have such a disturbing effect on Foucault? Why did he exhume these secular accounts, while he could simply have continued establishing the micro-history of anti-psychiatry struggles and described the insurrections of his own times? ⁵⁹ The battle on the front-lines had changed its physiognomy, perhaps there was no longer the same *rapport de force*.⁶⁰ And if that had not yet been confirmed (this was in 1976) when anti-psychiatry and the genealogy of the anti-psychiatry struggles, even if no professionals had yet taken a stand to show that the genealogies were false or ill-founded⁶¹, this is surely not because the battle had been definitively won. The silence of the adversary is not always a sign of his defeat. It could also be reflect our inability to make him afraid. ⁶²

Foucault had understood before anyone else that the old forces of resistance to power are no longer able to explain changes taking place. The infamous man, in his abjection and his extravagance, is perhaps the new figure that Foucault would put in a genealogy of possible resistances. After the hysteric who offered her body up to Charcot, after the inmate of Gorizia who resisted by the insurrection through his voice, there is now the infamous man, without either body or voice, “purely verbal existence” - “*pure existence verbale*”⁶³, consisting solely in the few words which power has uttered to crush him, an existence enclosed in its sarcophagus of phrases to which no appeal is possible, which can neither talk to us nor touch us, yet which still haunts us with the abysmal discourse with which he has been embalmed. His protest is neither a symptom nor an act of revolt, neither an act of seduction nor of aggression, it is a life which lives on in what it possesses in its darkest and deafest recesses: coagulated blood in the extinguished heart of the discourse, the ultimate level of resistance, an anonymous resistance, fortuitous and silent, situated beyond the conflict with power. Anonymous because these lives are faceless⁶⁴; fortuitous because their presence is the result of chance ⁶⁵; and silent because their resistance, consisting of those few words that have survived, is paradoxically mute. Their actions do not have a voice. And it is precisely in the opposition between a tacit and obscure presence and the light of sovereignty and of discipline

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

⁵⁹ M. Foucault, “*Il faut défendre la société*” [...], p. 12.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁶³ M. Foucault, “La vie des hommes infâmes”, in *Dits et écrits*, n° 198, vol 3, p. 242.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

that we can recognize the extreme example of resistance: to divest oneself silently of power's control.

Paradoxically, it is this infamy, at the same time both tragic and comic, that Foucault wanted to protect. This is perhaps why "The Life of Infamous Men" is "a beautiful comic master-piece" as Gilles Deleuze suggested.⁶⁶ There is not just the distress on encountering these harrowing lives, but also the laughter – the kind provoked by the impossible desire of wanting to belong to one of these existences, by the temptation to disappear in order to re-appear in a way that is entirely unpredictable. Or perhaps never to re-appear. Herein lies Foucault's extreme subjectivization, the existential aesthetic of his last years, his secret form of resistance within the folds of power, his defense of an ethical autonomy: an abstemious style, a lucid and measured choice of words, an attentive and ironic regard, and finally the search for a silent freedom, that way of always losing himself, as Deleuze described it so well.⁶⁷

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⁶⁶ G. Deleuze, *Negotiations [...]*, p. 150.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

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