

**Critique and Enlightenment.  
Michel Foucault on "Was ist Aufklärung?"**

Maurizio PASSERIN D'ENTRÈVES

University of Manchester

Barcelona

Working Paper n.118

1996

Foucault saw himself as perpetuating the principle whereby philosophers «enlighten» their present, which Kant introduced in his classic 1784 paper that defines Enlightenment as an emancipation from self-imposed «immaturity». But while Foucault may have tried to enlighten our present, he was hardly a figure of **the** Enlightenment. Indeed he is often taken as the great modern counter-Enlightenment philosopher and historian. More precisely, Foucault's nominalism is directed against the **universalism** of the Enlightenment [...] In reversing, dispersing, and criticizing what was taken to be universal, Foucault attacks what, in the present, has come to be regarded as *the* Enlightenment<sup>1</sup>.

One of the last writings Foucault was able to complete before his death in June 1984 was an essay entitled «What is Enlightenment?». This was meant to be delivered at the University of California, Berkeley in the spring 1984 as part of a seminar on modernity and the Enlightenment whose participants would have included Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, Richard Rorty, Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow. The seminar never took place, due to Foucault's death, and the essay thus became a sort of testament of Foucault's stance toward the Enlightenment and, more specifically, toward Kant's answer to the question «*Was ist Aufklärung?*» formulated in 1784 in the pages of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*. But Foucault's interest in Kant's answer to the question «What is Enlightenment?» went back at least a decade. He had in fact composed an article entitled «Qu'est-ce que la critique? [Critique et *Aufklärung*]» which was delivered as a lecture before the Société française de Philosophie in May 1978, and devoted the opening lecture of a course at the Collège de France in 1983 to an assessment of Kant's essay on the Enlightenment and his attitude to the French Revolution<sup>2</sup>. In these essays Foucault presented what may be called a qualified defence of the Enlightenment, in particular, of its critical attitude to the present which he termed a «philosophical ethos». In offering a qualified endorsement of the Enlightenment «ethos» of critique, Foucault appeared to betray his earlier understanding of the Enlightenment as the age that paved the way for the «sciences of man», i.e. the sciences of discipline and normalization, of surveillance and control of bodies and souls, of marginalization and exclusion of the deviant, the abnormal, the insane. «In the history of the sciences», he wrote, «it is a matter at bottom of examining a reason, the autonomy of whose structures carries with it a history of dogmatism and despotism -a reason, consequently, which can only have an effect of emancipation on condition that it manages to liberate itself from itself [...] Two centuries later, the Enlightenment returns: but not at all as a way for the West to take cognizance of its present possibilities and of the liberties to which it can have access, but as a way of interrogating it on its limits and on the powers which it has abused. Reason as despotic enlightenment»<sup>3</sup>.

Judged against the tenor of this statement, Foucault's later pronouncements strike a discordant note. In his 1984 essay «What is Enlightenment?» he characterizes it as a «permanent reactivation of an attitude - that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era»<sup>4</sup>. Not surprisingly, a number of commentators have explored this tension or contradiction in Foucault's attitude toward the Enlightenment, and reached fairly similar conclusions. Habermas, for instance, ends his brief eulogy of Foucault with the following observation:

Only a complex thinking produces instructive contradictions [...] He contrasts his critique of power with the «analytic of truth» in such a fashion that the former becomes deprived of the normative yardsticks that it would have to borrow from the latter. Perhaps the force of this contradiction caught up with Foucault in this last of his texts, drawing him again into the circle of the philosophical discourse of modernity which he thought he could explode<sup>5</sup>.

Richard Bernstein claims that many responses are possible to Foucault's contradictory stance toward the Enlightenment, for example, that he changed his mind, that he adopted a more conciliatory tone, that he was rewriting his own history, and so on. Perhaps, he says, «we can give a different, more sympathetic reading of what Foucault is doing», a reading that enables us to get a better grasp of his critical project, but that still leaves us with a number of unresolved problems, chief among which is the lack of an adequate evaluative perspective from which to specify what is uniquely dangerous about modernity and its techniques of normalization<sup>6</sup>. Thomas McCarthy, for his part, recognizes that Foucault's «belated affirmation» of the philosophical ethos of the Enlightenment «signals important changes in Foucault's understanding of his critical project», but claims that neither Foucault's «social ontology of power», nor his later concern with techniques of «self-fashioning» provide «an adequate framework for critical social inquiry»<sup>7</sup>.

I would like in what follows to provide an equally critical but nuanced perspective on Foucault's attitude to the Enlightenment. For this purpose I will offer a detailed examination and assessment of Foucault's essays on Kant and the Enlightenment, starting with his 1978 article «Qu'est-ce que la critique?»

## **ENLIGHTENMENT VERSUS GOVERNMENTALITY**

The aim of this article was to examine the emergence in the early modern era of a «critical attitude» in response to the development of a system of power

that Foucault called «governmentality». In 1978 and 1979 Foucault had given a number of lectures on the question of governmentality at the Collège de France in which he analyzed the development of a set of political strategies and techniques that aimed at governing individuals in a continuous, regular and permanent fashion<sup>8</sup>. These techniques and strategies of governmentality were the product of two different conceptions of political power: the Christian model of pastoral rule and the Greek model of the self-determining polis. Out of these two conceptions there arose the rationale underpinning the modern doctrine of «reason of state»<sup>9</sup>. Such a rationale entrusted political authorities with a power to survey, control and discipline individuals which had previously been the prerogative of religious authorities. Foucault's studies on governmentality offered a historical genealogy of those techniques of political control and surveillance that would eventually culminate in the modern forms of disciplinary power so well documented in his pioneering book *Discipline and Punish*. But, as we know from that book, each form of power generates its own form of resistance, so Foucault's account of the emergence of governmentality involves at the same time an account of the emergence of the specific form of resistance which this new form of power instigates or makes possible. The lecture «Qu'est-ce que la critique?» is devoted precisely to providing an account of the distinctive form of resistance to governmentality. In this lecture Foucault argues that resistance to governmentality did not take the form of an absolute opposition. The answer to the question «how to govern?» which dominated political discourse in the early modern era did not, in fact, take the form of «how not to be governed». Rather, it crystallized around a set of more specific issues, such as: «how not to be governed like that, by that, in the name of principles such as that, in view of such objectives and by the means of such procedures»<sup>10</sup>. For Foucault, this attempt to question or challenge the particular forms in which the «art of governance» is exercised signals the emergence of the modern notion of critique -which Foucault characterizes as «the art of not being governed in such a manner»<sup>11</sup>.

This questioning or resistance to governmentality is directed both at the spiritual authority of the church and at the temporal authority of civil rulers: their claim to speak with authority is met with a resistance which takes the form of a questioning of their power to define the truth for the subject. As Foucault puts it, «the focus of critique is essentially the bundle of relations which tie ... power, the truth, and the subject»<sup>12</sup>. Thus, while governmentality subjects individuals to a power that lays claim to truth, critique is «the movement by which the subject gives itself the right to interrogate the truth with respect to its effects of power and interrogate power with respect to its discourse of truth»<sup>13</sup>. Critique is thus best characterized as «the art of voluntary inservitude» (an ironic and purposeful

reversal of the title of Etienne de La Boétie's political tract of 1550, *Le Discours de la Servitude Volontaire*), as «a thoughtful indocility» which aims at «desubjectification» within the «politics of truth»<sup>14</sup>.

After having provided this account of the origins of the idea of critique, Foucault turns to an examination of Kant's definition of Enlightenment, a definition that he considers very pertinent to the issue explored in the first part of the lecture, namely, the mutual implication of critique and governmentality. Kant's definition of Enlightenment is as follows:

*Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! Have the courage to use your own understanding!*<sup>15</sup>.

Four aspects of Kant's definition are seen as relevant to Foucault's own discussion of the intertwining of critique and governmentality. First, the Enlightenment is defined as the opposite to a state of immaturity or tutelage. Second, this state of immaturity is seen as the incapacity to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another (heteronomy). Third, Kant suggests a connection between an excess of authority, on the one hand, and a lack of courage and resolution, on the other. Finally, the domains in which the contest between a state of immaturity and one of enlightenment takes place are those highlighted by Foucault in his discussion of the opposition of critique to governmentality, namely, religion, law, and conscience.

Kant's definition of Enlightenment thus bears a close affinity to the issues raised in Foucault's essay. Moreover, according to Foucault, Kant's defence of enlightenment was not blind to the interplay between critique and power. The Enlightenment's motto: «*Sapere aude!*» -have the courage to use your own reason- was counterbalanced by the injunction, attributed to Frederick the Great, to: «*Argue as much as you like and about whatever you like, but obey!*» By counterposing these two claims, and by accepting as legitimate the restrictions imposed on the private use of reason, Kant seems to acknowledge the limits of critique. The courage to know is at one and the same time the courage to recognize the limits of reason. Such a reason finds its legitimate employment only in its public use, by which Kant means the use «which anyone may make of it as a man of learning addressing the entire reading public»<sup>16</sup>. And the interweaving of argument and obedience contained in the quote attributed to Frederick II

indicates Kant's awareness of what Foucault calls the «play of power and truth». Obedience to the sovereign is made legitimate by being grounded on the autonomy of reasoning subjects. The activity of critique is a play of power and truth (of obedience and argument) insofar as it gives the subject the power to determine itself, to retain its autonomy while acknowledging the authority of the sovereign.

Having explored the links between Kant's definition of Enlightenment and his own conception of critique («the art of voluntary inservitude»), Foucault considers, in the final part of the lecture, the fate these ideals underwent in the nineteenth century. According to Foucault, the history of the nineteenth century can be seen as carrying on the critical project which Kant identified with the Enlightenment, but with critique now turned at Enlightenment itself. Three crucial developments are seen as motivating this re-orientation of critique toward the original ideals of the Enlightenment. First, the development of positivist science. Second, the emergence of a teleological (viz. Hegel) and technocratic (viz. St. Simon) conception of the state. Third, the binding together of positive science and the state into a «science of the state»<sup>17</sup>.

Faced with these developments, can the enlightenment ideal of a critique of arbitrary political power be sustained? Can the critique of governmentality be effective once reason, in the form of positivist science, has been shown to be intimately connected to the excesses of state power? Foucault identifies two responses to this dilemma. The first, developed in Germany in the writings of the Hegelian Left, Weber, and the Frankfurt School, takes the form of a critique of positivism, scientism and instrumental reason, seen as the handmaidens of an insidious form of power. The second, developed in France in the works of historians and philosophers of science such as Cavailles, Bachelard and Canguilhem, takes the form of a critical inquiry into the factors conducive to the emergence and eventual predominance of one particular form of rationality. Here the question that is raised is what Foucault calls the «*réci-proque et l'inverse*» of the original aspirations of the Enlightenment, namely: «How is it that rationalization is conducive to a desire for power?»<sup>18</sup>.

This question had also been at the centre of the Frankfurt School's critique of instrumental reason, and Foucault acknowledged the deep affinity that existed between his genealogical inquiries and the work of the Frankfurt School<sup>19</sup>. Both had been concerned with the question that Kant addressed for the first time in 1784 («What is Enlightenment?») and both could be seen as continuing the interrogation of reason initiated by Kant. In the case of Foucault, such

interrogation must now take the form of «historico-philosophical» investigations which examine «the relations between the structures of rationality that articulate true discourses and the mechanisms of subjectification which are bound to them»<sup>20</sup>. The question «What is Enlightenment?» invites now the question: «What is it that I am, the me which belongs to this humanity, perhaps to this fragment ... to this instant of humanity which is subjected to the power of truth in general and of truths in particular?»<sup>21</sup>.

The aim of the «historico-philosophical» inquiries which address this new question is, as Foucault puts it, to «desubjectivize philosophical questions by recourse to historical content», and «to free the historical contents by an interrogation of the effects of the power of this truth»<sup>22</sup>. These inquiries will concern themselves with that extended epoch which constitutes «the moment of formation of modern humanity», with «*Aufklärung* in the broad sense of the term, of that period without fixed dates to which Kant, Weber, and others, make reference, of those multiple entries by which it may be defined, such as the formation of capitalism, the constitution of the bourgeois world, the establishment of the state system, [and] the foundation of modern science with its correlative techniques». Thus, to pose today the question as to «What is 'What is Enlightenment'?» is, Foucault concludes, «to encounter the historical problematic of our modernity»<sup>23</sup>.

## ENLIGHTENMENT AND REVOLUTION

Foucault's 1983 lecture, translated in English with the title «Kant on Enlightenment and Revolution», indicates a slight change of direction. Enlightenment is no longer viewed as being closely tied to the idea of critique, as exemplifying the attitude which had emerged in response to the techniques and strategies of governmentality. Rather, the focus now is on the Enlightenment as a period in history marked by a novel awareness of its own presentness and singularity. Kant's essay on the Enlightenment introduces «a new type of question in the field of philosophical reflection», namely, «the question of the present, of the contemporary moment» which is without precedent in the history of philosophy<sup>24</sup>. In Kant's essay, Foucault maintains, «one sees philosophy ... problematizing its own discursive present-ness: a present-ness which it interrogates as an event, an event whose meaning, value and philosophical singularity it is required to state, and in which it is to elicit at once its own **raison d'être** and the foundation of what it has to say» (KER (Kant on Enlightenment and Revolution), 89).

Foucault now stresses the link between the new kind of philosophical reflection inaugurated by the Enlightenment and the focus on modernity. «Philosophy as the problematization of a present-ness», he writes, «the interrogation by philosophy of this present-ness of which it is a part and relative to which it is obliged to locate itself: this may well be the characteristic trait of philosophy as a discourse of and upon modernity» (KER, 89).

Foucault also emphasizes the fact that with the emergence of the Enlightenment there appears a new way of posing the question of modernity, «no longer within a longitudinal relationship to the Ancients, but rather in what one might call a 'sagittal' relation to one's own present-ness» (KER, 90). The Enlightenment is, in fact, the first age which named itself the Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*); in this sovereign act of naming itself «a cultural process of indubitably a very singular character ... came to self-awareness» (KER, 90). The Enlightenment is the first epoch which «names its own self» and which, rather than simply characterizing itself against other epochs as «a period of decadence or prosperity, splendour or misery», views itself as a period with its own special mission and purpose (KER, 90).

Foucault then proceeds to examine Kant's essay of 1798, *The Contest of Faculties*, focusing on Kant's discussion of the French Revolution. He argues that there is a deep connection between the 1784 essay «What is Enlightenment?» and the 1798 essay, insofar as both were concerned with exploring the meaning of the present, of the contemporary moment. In 1784, he writes, Kant «tried to answer the question put to him, 'What is this *Aufklärung* of which we are a part'? and in 1798 he answered a question which contemporary reality posed for him ... This question was 'What is the Revolution?'" (KER, 91).

Kant's analysis of the French Revolution is pursued in the context of attempting to answer the broader question «Is the human race continually improving?» In order to answer this question, one had to identify an event in human history that would indicate, or be a sign of, the existence of a permanent cause which guides mankind in the direction of progress. Such a cause had to be permanent in the sense that it had to be shown to be operative throughout the course of human history. Hence the event that will enable us to decide whether the human race is constantly improving must be a sign that is *rememorative* (showing that the alleged cause of progress has been operative in the past), *demonstrative* (demonstrating that it is active in the present), and *prognostic* (indicating that it will also operate in the future). Only then will we be sure that the



cause which makes progress possible has not just acted at a particular moment in time, but guarantees a general tendency of the human race as a whole to advance in the direction of progress<sup>25</sup>.

Kant found the sign of such a progress in the event of the French Revolution, an event which he identified not with «those momentous deeds or misdeeds of men which make small in their eyes what was formerly great or make great what was formerly small», but with «the attitude of the onlookers as it reveals itself *in public* while the drama of great political changes is taking place»<sup>26</sup>. In the «universal yet disinterested sympathy» that the public openly shows toward one set of protagonists, regardless of the cost it may carry to themselves, Kant finds evidence of human progress. «Their reaction», he writes, «because of its *universality*, proves that mankind as a whole shares a certain character in common, and it also proves, because of its *disinterestedness*, that man has a moral character, or at least the makings of one. And this does not merely allow us to hope for human improvement; it is already a form of improvement in itself, insofar as its influence is strong enough for the present»<sup>27</sup>. In sum, it is not the success or failure of the Revolution, but rather the «*sympathy* which borders almost on enthusiasm» with which it was received by the non-participating spectators, that provides a sign that the human race is improving.

This sympathy cannot be caused, Kant says, «by anything other than a moral disposition within the human race». This moral disposition manifests itself in two ways: 1) the *right* of every people to give itself a republican constitution, and 2) the *aim* of submitting to those conditions enshrined in a republican constitution by which war may be averted<sup>28</sup>.

It is clear, as Foucault remarks, that these two elements are also central to the process of enlightenment, that the Revolution «does indeed complete and continue the process of *Aufklärung*», and that, to this extent, «both *Aufklärung* and Revolution are events which can never be forgotten» (KER, 94). Or, as Kant puts it:

Even without the mind of a seer, I now maintain that I can predict from the aspects and signs of our times that the human race will achieve this end [of giving itself a republican constitution which will prevent offensive wars], and that it will henceforth progressively improve without any more total reversals. For a phenomenon of this kind which has taken place in human history *can never be forgotten*, since it has revealed in human nature an aptitude and power for improvement of a kind which no politician could have thought up by examining the course of events in the past<sup>29</sup>.

Moreover, anticipating the skeptical challenge, even if the intended object behind the occurrence we have described were not to be achieved for the present, or if a people's revolution or constitutional reform were ultimately to fail, or if, after the latter had lasted for a certain time, everything were to be brought back onto its original course ... our own philosophical prediction still loses none of its force. For the occurrence in question is too momentous, too intimately interwoven with the interests of humanity and too widespread in its influence upon all parts of the world for nations not to be reminded of it when favourable circumstances present themselves, and to rise up and make renewed attempts of the same kind as before<sup>30</sup>.

Thus, even if the Revolution may miscarry, its very existence attests to a permanent human disposition or potentiality that cannot be ignored: it is the guarantee for future history that the human race will continue to improve.

Now, just as Kant was not concerned to provide a justification for the success or failure of the French Revolution, but to interpret the significance of that event for the present, so Foucault is not concerned with determining «what part of the Revolution should be retained and set up as a model». Rather, as he puts it, «it is to know what is to be done with that will to revolution, that 'enthusiasm' for the Revolution, which is quite different from the revolutionary enterprise itself» (KER, 95).

This statement is rather striking and liable to divergent interpretations. The employment of a term such as «the will to revolution» to characterize the enthusiasm displayed toward the event by sympathetic spectators bears strong Nietzschean traces (the «will to revolution» as a synecdoche of the «will to knowledge», and thus of the «will to power»). This is, in effect, how Habermas interprets it in his eulogy of Foucault. «For Foucault», he writes, «the challenge of the Kant texts he has chosen is to decode that will once contained in the enthusiasm for the French Revolution, namely, the will-to-knowledge [...] Up to now, Foucault traced this will-to-knowledge in modern power-formations only to denounce it. Now, however, he presents it in a completely different light, as the critical impulse worthy of preservation and in need of renewal»<sup>31</sup>.

This is indeed a legitimate reading of Foucault's statement, but an equally legitimate one is to stress that the «will to revolution» is not a synonym of the «will to power», but a synonym of a «will to freedom» understood in a prosaic, non-Nietzschean sense. Such a will to freedom would transgress against the limits of the given and provide a space for the re-fashioning of subjectivity. I shall take up this issue later in my discussion of Foucault's essay «What is Enlightenment?» For now it is sufficient to notice that Foucault saw revolution and revolt (the

example he used was that of the Iranian Revolution) as the means whereby subjectivity «introduces itself into history and gives it a breath of life»<sup>32</sup>. Revolution, in this sense, provides the opportunity for such a «will to freedom» to interrupt the continuum of history and to refashion subjectivity in a novel way.

Foucault concludes his essay by noting that the two questions -»What is Enlightenment?» and «What is the Revolution?»- are the two forms under which Kant posed the question of his own present. They are also, he maintains, «the two questions which have continued to haunt, if not all modern philosophy since the nineteenth century, at least a great part of it» (KER, 95). But he is quick to point out that it is not a question of preserving alive and intact the heritage of the Enlightenment. «It is not the legacy of *Aufklärung* which it is our business to conserve», he writes, «but rather the very question of this event and its meaning, the question of the historicity of the thought of the universal, which ought to be kept present and retained in mind as that which has to be thought» (KER, 95).

«The historicity of the thought of the universal»: here Foucault's historicism and nominalism come to full view. What matters for him is to relativize and contextualize those historical factors that since the eighteenth century have enabled the «thought of the universal» (of the necessary, the obligatory, the transcendental) to prevail over the «thought of the singular» (of the contingent, the arbitrary, the merely empirical), and to disqualify and subjugate the latter. The urge to demystify the privilege accorded to the «universal» in the tradition stemming from the Enlightenment is reasserted in the concluding paragraphs of the essay, where Foucault draws a distinction between two critical traditions initiated by Kant. The first, which he calls an «analytic of truth», is preoccupied with defining «the conditions under which a true knowledge is possible». This is the tradition initiated by Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. The second, which he terms «an ontology of the present, an ontology of ourselves», is concerned with the question: «What is our present? What is the contemporary field of possible experience?» (KER, 96). This other tradition, which he sees emerging in Kant's essay on the Enlightenment and his reflections on the French Revolution, abandons the search for those universal conditions that determine whether sentences can be true or false, and concerns itself exclusively with the question of actuality, namely, the question of our present and its field of possible experience. In separating the «ontology of the present» from the «analytic of truth» in such a radical fashion Foucault lays himself open to Habermas's charge, to wit, that he deprives himself of the normative standards that the former must unavoidably borrow from the latter. A more generous reading, however, would point out that the ontology of the present and of ourselves favoured by Foucault is

meant to open up a space for reflection, for a critical interrogation that destabilizes our currently accepted ways of being, of doing, of thinking. It is to these questions that Foucault turns his attention in the last of the essays he devoted to Kant. Let us then look closely at what he has to say.

## ENLIGHTENMENT AS TRANSGRESSION

In his 1984 essay «What is Enlightenment?» Foucault attempts to formulate an answer to the very same question that was posed to Kant in 1784 by the German periodical *Berlinische Monatsschrift*. In his view, «*Was ist Aufklärung?*» marks the entry into the history of thought «of a question that modern philosophy has not been capable of answering, but that it has never managed to get rid of, either ... From Hegel through Nietzsche or Max Weber to Horkheimer or Habermas, hardly any philosophy has failed to confront this same question, directly or indirectly» (WE (What is Enlightenment?), 32).

Foucault argues that Kant was not the first philosopher who had sought to reflect on his own present. Throughout Western history philosophers have posed the question of the present and, broadly speaking, their answers have taken three forms:

1) The present was seen as belonging to an era of the world marked by inherent characteristics (the present as a definite world era, exemplified in Plato's *Statesman*);

2) The present was interrogated in order to discover signs of a forthcoming event (the present as a threshold, exemplified in St. Augustine's *The City of God*);

3) The present was conceived as a point of transition toward the dawning of a new world (the present as an accomplishment, exemplified in Vico's *La Scienza Nuova*).

Kant's originality consisted in inaugurating a new way of thinking about the relation between philosophy and the present. For Kant, the Enlightenment is «neither a world era to which one belongs, nor an event whose signs are perceived, nor the dawning of an accomplishment. Kant defines *Aufklärung* in an almost entirely negative way, as an **Ausgang**, an 'exit,' a 'way out' [...] He is not seeking to understand the present on the basis of a totality or of a future achievement. He is looking for a difference: What difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday?» (WE, 34). Enlightenment is not conceived within the framework of a progressive teleology of history. Rather, it is seen as a process that releases us from self-incurred immaturity, a process that is at the same time

an individual task and obligation. It is «a process in which men participate collectively» and «an act of courage to be accomplished personally» (WE, 35). Enlightenment means the striving for maturity and responsibility (*Mündigkeit*). It represents the moment «when humanity is going to put its own reason to use, without subjecting itself to any authority» (WE, 38). And it is precisely at this moment, Foucault remarks, stressing the connection between Kant's essay on the Enlightenment and the three *Critiques*, that «the critique is necessary, since its role is that of defining the conditions under which the use of reason is legitimate in order to determine what can be known, what must be done, and what may be hoped» (WE, 38). It is only when the legitimate employment of reason has been defined, in both the theoretical and practical spheres, that its autonomy can be assured. Thus, the critique is «the handbook of reason that has grown up in Enlightenment; and, conversely, the Enlightenment is the age of the critique» (WE, 38).

Foucault sums up his assessment of Kant's essay by noting how this text is located at the crossroads of «critical reflection» and «reflection on history». By this he means not simply that it represents a reflection by Kant on the contemporary status of his own philosophical enterprise. Rather, he means to highlight the fact that «it is the first time that a philosopher has connected in this way, closely and from the inside, the significance of his work with respect to knowledge, a reflection on history, and a particular analysis of the specific moment at which he is writing and because of which he is writing». In this respect, «it is in the reflection on 'today' as *difference* in history and as *motive* for a particular philosophical task that the novelty of this text appears ... to lie» (WE, 38, emphases added). Kant's text on the Enlightenment thus provides the outline of what Foucault calls «the attitude of modernity» (WE, 38).

It is at this point that Foucault's essay takes a rather unexpected turn. He claims that modernity should be seen as an attitude rather than as a period in history -«a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling». Such an attitude is a way of «acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task. A bit, no doubt, like what the Greeks called an *ethos*» (WE, 39). In order to characterize such an attitude or ethos, Foucault turns to a discussion of Baudelaire's essay «The Painter of Modern Life». Baudelaire was one of the first to recognize that modernity meant an awareness of the discontinuity of time, of a break with tradition, that it induced «a feeling of novelty, of vertigo in the face of the passing moment» (WE, 39)<sup>33</sup>.

In his essay Baudelaire defined modernity as «the ephemeral, the fleeting, the contingent», and stressed that these elements must «on no account be despised or dispensed with»<sup>34</sup>. One had no right to despise the present. Rather, one had to adopt a certain attitude toward it, an attitude which recaptured something eternal in the fleeting moment. As an example, Baudelaire cites the work of Constantin Guys, who was able to «extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distil the eternal from the transitory»<sup>35</sup>. The attitude of modernity makes it possible, in Foucault's words, «to grasp the 'heroic' aspect of the present moment ... it is the will to 'heroize' the present» (WE, 40). This «heroization» of the present, Foucault pointedly remarks, is ironical. It does not treat the passing moment as sacred in order to preserve it, nor does it involve collecting it as a fleeting and interesting curiosity. Rather, the ironic heroization of the present is an act of *transfiguration*. Transfiguration «does not entail an annulling of reality, but a difficult interplay between the truth of what is real and the exercise of freedom» (WE, 41). In this interplay, «natural» things become «more than natural», and «beautiful» things «more than beautiful». It is in this sense of a transfigurative interplay of freedom and reality that Foucault characterizes the attitude of modernity, its ironic heroization of the present. «For the attitude of modernity», he writes, «the high value of the present is indissociable from a desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than it is ... Baudelairean modernity is an exercise in which extreme attention to what is real is confronted with the practice of a liberty that simultaneously *respects* this reality and *violates* it» (WE, 41, emphases added).

As we shall see, this is very much the attitude or ethos that Foucault adopts vis-a-vis the present: simultaneously to respect it in its singularity and to violate it in its claim to embody universality (whether such universality pertains to the structure of reason, the logic of history, or the truths of human nature). His stance is indeed one of transgression, one that he set out brilliantly in his preface to Georges Bataille's *oeuvre* in 1963<sup>36</sup>. The same can be said of his attitude to the self. Drawing again on Baudelaire, he claims that modernity is not simply a form of relationship to the present; it is also «a mode of relationship that has to be established with oneself» (WE, 41). «To be modern», he writes, «is not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of the passing moments; it is to take oneself as object of a complex and difficult elaboration: what Baudelaire, in the vocabulary of his day, calls *dandysme*» (WE, 41). The deliberate attitude of modernity is tied to an «indispensable asceticism». The dandy «makes of his body, his behaviour, his feelings and passions, his very existence, a work of art». Modern man does not seek «to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who

tries to **invent** himself». He is constantly faced with the task of «**producing** himself» (WE, 41-42, emphases added).

Foucault's attitude to the present is thus closely tied to his attitude to the self: just as the former must, ultimately, take the form of a possible transgression, so the latter must take the form of an original production and invention of the self, a self-fashioning or «*souci de soi*». There is no «human nature» to discover or unearth, no «human essence» to be freed or unshackled. There is only the constant, ever-renewed task to create ourselves freely, to pursue and give new impetus to «the undefined work of freedom» (WE, 46).

This attitude or ethos of self-fashioning which is to be freely adopted by each subject is certainly congruent with Baudelaire's reflections on the dandy, but is by no means congruent with Kant's position. As Thomas McCarthy has perceptively pointed out, «the representation of autonomy as aesthetic self-invention eliminates the universality at the heart of [Kant's] notion, the rational *Wille* expressed in norms binding on all agents alike»<sup>37</sup>. Foucault was fully aware of the distance separating his ethics of self-fashioning from any morality based on universal criteria. As he declared in his last interview: «The search for a form of morality acceptable to everybody, in the sense that everyone should submit to it, strikes me as catastrophic»<sup>38</sup>. He never inquired whether a form of morality based on universal principles *freely agreed to* by all subjects, a morality that provided a general framework of principles of justice within which individuals would be free to pursue their own particular conceptions of the good life, would be equally pernicious.

Foucault, in effect, wanted to adhere to an ethos of transgression and aesthetic self-fashioning («Couldn't everyone's life become a work of art?» he declared in a 1983 interview with Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow)<sup>39</sup> and attempted to trace such a modernist ethos, via Baudelaire, to Kant's reflections of the Enlightenment. He wished to emphasize «the extent to which a type of philosophical interrogation -one that simultaneously problematizes man's relation to the present, man's historical mode of being, and the constitution of the self as an autonomous subject- is rooted in the Enlightenment» (WE, 42). Preserving the legacy of the Enlightenment, however, does not mean «faithfulness to doctrinal elements, but rather the permanent reactivation of an attitude -that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as a *permanent critique of our historical era*» (WE, 42, emphasis added).

Foucault goes on to offer a positive characterization of this ethos, after having contrasted it negatively with what he calls the enlightenment blackmail of being either for or against the Enlightenment, and with the conflation of Enlightenment with humanism<sup>40</sup>. Such a philosophical ethos, he writes, «may be characterized as a *limit-attitude* [...] Criticism indeed consists of analyzing and reflecting upon limits. But if the Kantian question was that of knowing what limits knowledge had to renounce transgressing, it seems to me that the critical question today has to be turned back into a positive one: in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints?» (WE, 45). And, reiterating the theme that has been at the centre of my reading of Foucault's attitude to the Enlightenment, he asserts that the point is «to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a *possible transgression*» (WE, 45, emphasis added).

This is a philosophical ethos with a marked affinity to Georges Bataille, to Nietzsche, to the surrealist revolt against the stultifying bourgeois standards of cognition and action, of knowledge and morality. It is an ethos of transgression which revolts against all that is normative, all that which, in Foucault's understanding, leads to «normalization», to the regime of surveillance and control, of disciplinary power. In its most extreme version, this transgressive ethos, as Habermas has pointed out, «is addicted to the fascination of that horror which accompanies the act of profaning, and is yet always in flight from the trivial results of profanation»<sup>41</sup>.

Foucault did not, in the end, embrace this version of an ethos of transgression. Although he did actively seek certain «limit-experiences»<sup>42</sup> in both his work and in his life, he was more concerned, ultimately, with testing the «contemporary limits of the necessary» (WE, 43). In the context of his reflections on Kant and the Enlightenment, this meant a reappraisal and reformulation of the concept most central to the Enlightenment, namely, the concept of critique. «Criticism», he tells us, «is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value, but rather as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying» (WE, 45-6). Such criticism is «*genealogical* in its design» and «*archaeological* in its method». Archaeological, «in the sense that it will not seek to identify the universal structures of all knowledge or of all possible moral action, but will seek to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do as so many *historical events*» (WE, 46, emphasis added). Genealogical, «in the sense that it will not deduce



from the form of what we are what it is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of *no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think*» (WE, 46, emphasis added). In this respect, criticism «is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom» (WE, 46).

Foucault is quite aware that this liberating criticism, this work done «at the limits of ourselves», must be experimental, so that it may be able «both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take» (WE, 46). This criticism must also give up the hope of ever acceding «to any complete and definitive knowledge of what may constitute our historical limits» (WE, 47). The criticism of limits and the possibility of moving beyond them are always limited; but rather than being a drawback, we should acknowledge that this is what enables us to always begin again. Criticism, in other words, must be constantly reactivated: only in this way can it provide an impetus to our «undefined work of freedom».

We can see from these statements how Foucault's ethos of critique remains bound to certain limits even while it attempts to transgress or subvert them. It is this which distinguishes his position from the one taken by the more radical exponents of an ethos of transgression. And yet, it is the figure of Nietzsche, rather than that of Kant, that provides the major source of inspiration for Foucault's notion of critique. As he puts it in the concluding reflections on the meaning of that critical interrogation on the present and on ourselves inaugurated by Kant:

The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the *limits* that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of *going beyond them* (WE, 50, emphases added).

## **EPILOGUE: NIETZSCHE OR KANT?**

A few comments before closing. It is indeed a peculiar feature of the discussion around Foucault's work on Kant and the Enlightenment that a number of American commentators have tried to interpret it as somehow a return to the fold of a reasonable, accommodating community of «enlightened» inquiry. Dreyfus and Rabinow, to take an example, characterize Foucault's ironic stance

toward the present as one that encourages a «conflict of interpretations». They suggest that «the archaeological step back that Foucault takes in order to see the strangeness of our society's practices does not mean that he considers these practices meaningless. Since we share cultural practices with others, and since these practices have made us what we are, we have, perforce, some common footing from which to proceed, to understand, to act. But that foothold is no longer one which is universal, guaranteed, verified, or grounded». It follows, therefore, that «what makes one interpretive theory better than another ... has to do with articulating common concerns ... while leaving open the possibility of 'dialogue', or better, a conflict of interpretations, with other shared discursive practices used to articulate different concerns»<sup>43</sup>.

This is what I would call the American «taming» of Foucault. In the hands of such interpreters, Foucault's transgressive stance begins to look «human, all too human». What is missing in such a reading is Foucault's nietzscheanism, for whom the project of autonomy pursued by enlightenment thinkers from Kant to Habermas requires as a corrective a strong dose of «inhuman thoughts». Foucault's critical ontology of ourselves, his ethos of transgression and aesthetic self-fashioning are indeed much closer to Nietzsche's vision of a transvaluation of values than to Kant's notion of maturity (*Mündigkeit*)<sup>44</sup>. Let us not betray Foucault's inheritance by making him appear as, ultimately, a child of the Enlightenment. As the «masked» and ironic philosopher that he was, he deserves a better treatment from us.

## NOTES

1. RAJCHMAN, John: *Michel Foucault: The Freedom of Philosophy*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1985, p. 59.
2. SCHMIDT, J. and WARTENBERG, T. E.: «Foucault's Enlightenment: Critique, Revolution, and the Fashioning of the Self» in KELLY, M. (ed.): *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/ Habermas Debate*. Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1994, p. 283-314. I am indebted to this article for providing a reconstruction of Foucault's 1978 essay on the Enlightenment («Qu'est-ce que la critique?»).
3. FOUCAULT, M.: «Georges Canguilhem: Philosopher of Error», trans. G. Burchell, *Ideology and Consciousness*, n° 7/Autumn 1980, p. 51-62, at p. 54. This essay was written as an introduction to G. Canguilhem, *Le Normal et la Pathologique*. Paris, PUF, 1966. A translation of the same essay is available in G. Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, trans. C. Fawcett. New York, Zone Books, 1989, p. ix-xx. A somewhat different French version later appeared as «La vie: l'expérience et la science», *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 90/1985, p. 3-14.
4. FOUCAULT, M.: «What is Enlightenment?» trans. C. Porter, in RABINOW, P. (ed.): *The Foucault Reader*. New York, Pantheon Books, 1984, p. 32-50, at p. 42. Page references to this article will be given in round brackets in the text, preceded by the abbreviation WE.
5. HABERMAS, J.: «Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present», trans. S. Brauner and R. Brown, in HOY, D.C. (ed.): *Foucault: A Critical Reader*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986, p. 103-108, at p. 107-108.
6. BERNSTEIN, R.: «Foucault: Critique as a Philosophic Ethos», in *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, op. cit., p. 211-241, at p. 222, 227.
7. MCCARTHY, T.: «The Critique of Impure Reason: Foucault and the Frankfurt School», in *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, op. cit., p. 243-282, at p. 259, 272.
8. FOUCAULT, M.: «Omnes et Singulatim: Towards a Criticism of 'Political Reason'», in McMURRIN, S. (ed.): *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. 2. Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 1981, p. 225-254. This essay is also included under the title «Politics and Reason», in KRITZMAN, L.D. (ed.): *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture*. New York, Routledge, 1988, p. 57-85. FOUCAULT, M.: «Governmentality», trans. R. Braidotti, in BURCHELL, G. GORDON, C. and MILLER, P. (eds.): *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 87-104.
9. Foucault remarks that: «Our societies proved to be really demonic, since they happened to combine these two games -the city-citizen game and the shepherd-flock game- in what we call the modern states». FOUCAULT, M.: «Omnes et Singulatim: Towards a Criticism of 'Political Reason'», op. cit., p. 239.
10. FOUCAULT, M.: «Qu'est-ce que la critique? [Critique et Aufklärung]», *Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie*, 84/1990, p. 35-63, at p. 37-38. Translation forthcoming in SCHMIDT, J. (ed.): *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth Century Answers and Twentieth Century Questions*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. KANT, I.: «An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment'?» in REISS, H. (ed.): *Kant's Political Writings*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970, p. 54-60, at p. 54.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

17. FOUCAULT, M.: «Qu'est-ce que la critique?», op. cit., p. 42.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
19. See the 1983 interview with Gérard Raulet, «Critical Theory/ Intellectual History», trans. J. Harding, in KRITZMAN, L.D. (ed.): *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture*. New York, Routledge, 1988, p. 17-46; another translation is available with the title «How Much Does it Cost for Reason to Tell the Truth?» trans. M. Foret and M. Martius, in LOTRINGER, S. (ed.): *Foucault Live: Interviews 1966-1984*. New York, Semiotext(e), 1989, p. 233-256.
20. FOUCAULT, M.: «Qu'est-ce que la critique?», op. cit., p. 45.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*
24. FOUCAULT, M.: «Kant on Enlightenment and Revolution», trans. C. Gordon, *Economy and Society*, vol. 15, n° 1/February 1986, p. 88-96, at p. 88. Page references to this article will be given in round brackets in the text, preceded by the abbreviation KER. There is also a translation of the same lecture by A. Sheridan, entitled «The Art of Telling the Truth», in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, op. cit., p. 86-95.
25. KANT, I.: «The Contest of Faculties», in *Kant's Political Writings*, op. cit., p. 176-190, at p. 181.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
27. *Ibid.*, emphases added.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 182-183.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
31. HABERMAS, J.: «Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present», op. cit., p. 107.
32. FOUCAULT, M.: «Is it Useless to Revolt?» trans. J. Bernauer, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 8, n° 1/Spring 1981, p. 1-9, at p. 8. See also FOUCAULT, M.: «Iran: The Spirit of a World Without Spirit», trans. A. Sheridan, in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture*. p. 211-224.
33. Habermas also draws on Baudelaire to characterize the new attitude of modernity. He claims that: «The spirit and discipline of aesthetic modernity assumed clear contours in the work of Baudelaire [...] Aesthetic modernity is characterized by attitudes which find a common focus in a changed consciousness of time [...] The new time consciousness ... does more than express the experience of mobility in society, acceleration in history, of discontinuity in everyday life. The new value placed on the transitory, the elusive, and the ephemeral, the very celebration of dynamism, discloses the longing for an undefiled, an immaculate and stable present». HABERMAS, J.: «Modernity versus Postmodernity», trans. S. Benhabib, *New German Critique*, n° 22/Winter 1981, p. 3-14, at p. 4-5.
34. BAUDELAIRE, Charles: *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. J. Mayne. London, Phaidon Press, 1964, p. 13.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
36. See M. Foucault, «Préface à transgression», *Critique*, 195-196/1963, p. 751-769; translated as «A Preface to Transgression», trans. D. F. Bouchard and S. Simon, in BOUCHARD, D.F. (ed.): *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 29-52. In that preface he claimed that «transgression is not related to the limit as black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the

inside». Rather, transgression «forces the limit to face the fact of its imminent disappearance» (*ibid.*, p. 34-35). For a useful discussion of this aspect of Foucault's thought, see HILEY, D.R.: *Philosophy in Question*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988, p. 106-110.

37. McCARTHY, T.: «The Critique of Impure Reason: Foucault and the Frankfurt School», in *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, op. cit., p. 269.

38. FOUCAULT, M.: «The Return of Morality», trans. T. Levin and I. Lorenz, in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, op. cit., p. 242-254, at p. 253-254.

39. FOUCAULT, M.: «On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress», in *The Foucault Reader*, op. cit., p. 340-372, at p. 350.

40. As regards the former, he maintains that: «One has to refuse everything that might present itself in the form of a simplistic and authoritarian alternative: you either accept the Enlightenment and remain within the tradition of its rationalism [...] or else you criticize the Enlightenment and then try to escape from its principles of rationality» (WE, 43). As regards the latter, he argues that: «The humanist thematic is in itself too supple, too diverse, too inconsistent to serve as an axis for reflection [...] I believe that this thematic ... can be opposed by the principle of a critique and a permanent creation of ourselves in our autonomy ... From this standpoint, I am inclined to see Enlightenment and humanism in a state of tension rather than identity [...] We must escape from the historical and moral confusionism that mixes the theme of humanism with the question of the Enlightenment» (WE, 44-45).

41. HABERMAS, J.: «Modernity versus Postmodernity», op. cit., p. 5.

42. For a stimulating discussion of Foucault's fascination with «limit-experiences», see MILLER, J.: *The Passion of Michel Foucault*. New York, Simon and Schuster, 1993.

43. DREYFUS, H.L. and RABINOW, P.: «What is Maturity? Habermas and Foucault on 'What is Enlightenment?'» in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, op. cit., p. 109-121, at p. 115.

44. For a contrasting «French» reading that stresses Foucault's debt to Nietzsche, see DELEUZE, G.: *Foucault*, trans. S. Hand. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, and Descombes, V.: *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding. Cambridge University Press, 1980.