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How Michel Foucault lost the left and won the right

Discussing Foucault in 2021 is not just a matter of academic interest. His changing position tells us a great deal about today's left and right

One of the strange things about the last year in Western political debate is how rarely the name of the departed philosopher Michel Foucault came up — and not for want of opportunity. One of Foucault's key concepts, 'biopolitics,' an account of the way that modern state power involves itself in the biological life of its citizens, was amply illustrated by the various governmental responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. The left-wing academic culture in which his work has long been dominant suddenly found its own influence extending all the way to corporate boardrooms and the halls of the CIA. A new volume of his work was published in English: 'Confessions of the Flesh,' an exegesis of early Christian sexual morality.

There was even a Foucault scandal, an accusation that he paid for sex with Tunisian boys in the 1960s — just the sort of claim, you might think, that would prompt a pan-ideological debate about whether the shaven-skulled icon of postmodernism should face some sort of cancellation.

But when I search the pages of The New York Times (a decent barometer of prominence and influence) for the past 12 months, Foucault's ideas and scandals merited at most a passing mention here and there. On Google Scholar, a different sort of barometer of influence, his citations actually dropped modestly in 2020. In debates about lockdowns, quarantines and other subjects associated with his historical and philosophical work, he was largely absent from liberal and left-wing discourse. You were more likely to hear his ideas invoked in conservative arguments, cited with a strange right-wing respect.

Foucault as a prism

The place of Foucault in 2021 is not just a matter of academic interest; his changing position tells us a great deal about recent evolutions of both the left and the right. The best guide to this change is a New York University lecturer named Geoff Shullenberger, who has written a pair of essays exploring the political valence of Foucauldian ideas. They are best read in reverse chronological order: Start with his long piece in the latest issue of American Affairs, 'How We Forgot Foucault,' which takes up the philosopher's peculiar absence from the pandemic debates, and then turn to his earlier essay, 'Theorycels in Trumpworld,' on the flowering of postmodern theories and themes among Trumpist figures on the right.

Taken together, the essays tell a story that's surprising at first but reasonable once you accept its premises: If Foucault's thought offers a radical critique of all forms of power and administrative control, then as the cultural left becomes more powerful and the cultural right more marginal, the left will have less use for his theories, and the right may find them more insightful.

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This political ambiguity, Shullenberger notes, has often attached to interpretations of Foucault's ideas, which in his lifetime made enemies on the Marxist left and found strange affinities with Islamic radicalism and neoliberalism. To be provocative, you could say that the French philosopher was a satanic figure in multiple senses of the term: personally a wicked hedonist who rejected limits on adult appetites (whether or not the Tunisia allegations are true, Foucault explicitly argued for the legitimacy of pederasty) and philosophically a sceptical accuser, like the Satan who appears in the Book of Job, ready to point the finger at the cracks, cruelties and hypocrisies in any righteous order, to deconstruct any system of power that claims to have truth and virtue on its side.

Identity politics on the left

In turn, that makes his work useful to any movement at war with established 'power-knowledge,' to use Foucauldian jargon, but dangerous and somewhat embarrassing once that movement finds itself responsible for the order of the world. And so the ideological shifts of the pandemic

era, the Foucault realignment, tells us something significant about the balance of power in the West — where the cultural left increasingly understands itself as a new establishment of 'power-knowledge,' requiring piety and loyalty more than accusation and critique.

This is most apparent with the debates over Covid-19. You could imagine a timeline in which the left was much more sceptical of experts, lockdowns and vaccine requirements — deploying Foucauldian categories to champion the individual's bodily autonomy against the state's system of control, defending popular scepticism against official knowledge, rejecting bureaucratic health management as just another mask for centralising power.

But left-wingers with those impulses have ended up allied with the populist and conspiratorial right. Meanwhile, the left writ large opted instead for a striking merger of technocracy and progressive ideology: a world of 'Believe the science,' where science required pandemic lockdowns but made exceptions for a March for Black Trans Lives, where Covid and structural racism were both public health emergencies, where scientific legitimacy and identity politics weren't opposed but intertwined.

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The impulse to establish legitimacy and order informs a lot of action on the left these days. The idea that the left is relativistic belongs to an era when progressives were primarily defining themselves against white heteronormative Christian patriarchy, with Foucauldian acid as a solvent for the old regime. Nobody watching today's progressivism at work would call it relativistic: Instead, the goal is increasingly to find new rules, new hierarchies, new moral categories to govern the post-Christian, post-patriarchal, post-cis-het world.

To this end, the categories of identity politics, originally embraced as liberative contrasts to older strictures, are increasingly used to structure a moral order of their own: to define who defers to whom, who can make sexual advances to whom and when, who speaks for which group, who gets special respect and who gets special scrutiny, what vocabulary is enlightened and which words are newly suspect, and what kind of guild rules and bureaucratic norms preside.

The Conservatives are right on relativism

Meanwhile, conservatives, the emergent regime's designated enemies, find themselves drawn to ideas that offer what Shullenberger calls a 'systematic critique of the institutional structures by which modern power operates' — even when those ideas belong to their old relativist and postmodernist enemies.

This is a temptation I wish the right were better able to resist. Having conservatives turn Foucauldian to own the libs doesn't seem worth the ironies — however rich and telling they may be.

Yes, the French philosopher was undoubtedly a certain kind of genius; yes, as Shullenberger writes, 'his critiques of institutions expose the limits of our dominant modes of politics,' including the mode that's ascendant on the left. But the older conservative critique of relativism's corrosive spirit is still largely correct. Which is why, even when it lands telling blows against progressive power, much of what seems postmodern about the Trump-era right also seems wicked, deceitful, even devilish.

In the end, one can reject the new progressivism, oppose the church of intersectionality — and still have a healthy fear of what might happen if you use the devil's tools to pull it down.

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