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What is a "Regime of Truth"?

In this paper, I offer an overview of the ways in which Foucault defines and uses the concept of 'regime of truth' in his works between 1975 and 1980, focusing especially on his lectures at the Collège de France *On the Government of the Living.* There, I argue, a substantial shift takes place, which corresponds to the emergence of the dimension of subjectivity at the heart of the concept of regime of truth itself. This shift bears witness to Foucault's elaboration of a new critical project, namely that of a genealogy of our contemporary regime of truth 'indexed to subjectivity'.

As far as I know, the first time Foucault introduces the concept of 'regime of truth' is in chapter one of *Discipline and Punish* where, speaking of the formation (within the new penal system in the 18th and 19th centuries) of a corpus of knowledge, techniques, 'scientific' discourses that became entangled with the practice of the power to punish, he argues that a new "regime of the truth" emerged.[1] Now, what makes this concept so interesting is the fact that, through this expression, Foucault links the notion of truth to the explicitly political notion of regime — as he does also in the February 18th, 1976 lecture of *Society Must Be Defended*, where he speaks of "our regime of truth and error" and incidentally makes it clear that 'regime' means here a certain *power* of separation between truth and error.[2]

But the most interesting text, before 1980, with regard to Foucault's use of the concept of regime of truth — leaving aside a short passage in *The Birth of Biopolitcs*[3] —, is without a doubt the 1976 interview "The political function of the intellectual", where Foucault argues, in contrast to a certain philosophical myth, that "truth isn't outside power, or deprived of power": on the contrary, truth "is produced by virtue of multiple constraints [a]nd it induces regulated effects of power". This is to say that "each society has its regime of truth", and by this expression Foucault means: (1) "the types of discourse [society] harbors and causes to function as true"; (2) "the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements" and (3) "the way in which each is sanctioned"; (4) "the techniques and procedures which are valorized for obtaining truth"; (5) "the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true".[4] Therefore, "truth" is "a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and functioning of statements"; it is linked "by a circular relation to systems of power which produce it and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which redirect it". And right at the end of the interview, Foucault adds that the essential political problem for us, today, is trying to *change* our "political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth" (where truth is modeled on the form of scientific discourse), in order to constitute a new "politics of truth".[5]

So, before 1980, the concept of regime of truth clearly refers to the well-known *circularity* Foucault establishes between power and knowledge: we should speak of a 'regime' of truth be-

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[1]   Michel Foucault: *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison*, Paris: Gallimard 1975, p. 30; trans. A. Sheridan: *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, New York: Vintage Books 1977, p. 23.

[2]   Michel Foucault: *Il faut défendre la société. Cours au Collège de France 1975–1976*, ed. M. Bertani and A. Fontana, Paris: Seuil/Gallimard 1997, p. 145; trans. D. Macey: *Society Must Be Defended. Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*, New York: Picador 2003, p. 164.

[3]   Michel Foucault: *Naissance de la biopolitique. Cours au Collège de France 1978-1979*, ed. M. Senellart, Paris: Seuil/Gallimard 2004, p. 20; trans. G. Burchell: *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2008, p. 18.

[4]   Michel Foucault: La fonction politique de l'intellectuel [1976], in: *Dits et écrits, vol. II: 1976–1988*, ed. D. Defert and F. Ewald, Paris: Gallimard, 2001, pp. 109–114, here p. 112; trans. C. Gordon: The political function of the intellectual, in: *Radical Philosophy*, 17 (Summer 1977), pp. 12–14, here p. 13.

[5]   Foucault: La fonction politique de l'intellectuel, pp. 113–114; The political function of the intellectual, p. 14.

cause truth is produced, sustained, valorized and regulated by a series of mechanisms, techniques and procedures that are 'political' — if we understand this term the way Foucault does: politics has to do not only with institutions, but with the complex and constitutive field of power relations within which we ordinarily live —, and at the same time truth itself reinforces and induces effects of power. A regime of truth is thus the strategic field within which truth is produced and becomes a tactical element in the functioning of a certain number of power relations.

However, as soon as we turn to Foucault's 1980 lectures at the Collège de France, we immediately notice that something has changed in the way he introduces and treats the concept of regime of truth. During the first lecture, Foucault describes an explicit shift he wishes to make in relation to the notion of power/knowledge: I would like to *get rid* of this notion, he announces, and try to develop instead the notion of "government by the truth". And since he has already elaborated, in *Security, Territory, Population* and in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, the notion of government as a series of mechanisms and procedures intended to conduct the conduct of human beings, his task in *Du gouvernement des vivants* will be "to develop the notion of knowledge in the direction of the problem of the truth"[6], or better in the direction of a genealogy of the relations between *autos* (the first person, the 'I') and *alethurgy* — between subjectivity and truth — within the "history of the truth in the West"[7].

Therefore, given the way the concept of regime of truth was characterized in 1976, we should expect some kind of shift in the definition Foucault gives of it in his 1980 lectures. Such a shift consists in the emergence of the dimension of *subjectivity*, a dimension Foucault introduces in the concept of regime of truth not only, and even not primarily, for theoretical reasons, but because he is trying to confront an issue that constitutes one of the crucial lines of fragility of our present: "Why and how does the exercise of power in our society, the exercise of power as government of human beings, demand not only acts of obedience and submission, but truth acts in which individuals who are subjects in the power relationship are also subjects as actors, spectator witnesses, or objects in manifestation of truth procedures? Why in this great economy of power relations has a regime of truth developed indexed to subjectivity?"[8].

Posing this problem means, for Foucault, at least three things: (1) redefining the concept of regime of truth; (2) putting it at the heart of his historical study of Christianity; (3) putting it also at the core of his genealogical study of our contemporary regime of truth.

So, firstly, Foucault claims that a regime of truth "is that which determines the obligations of individuals with regard to procedures of manifestation of truth", thus stressing the role played by the subject within such procedures. But Foucault immediately objects to himself: "What does the addition of this notion of obligation mean in relation to the notion of manifestation of truth?

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6   Michel Foucault: *Du gouvernement des vivants. Cours au Collège de France 1979–1980*, ed. M. Senellart, Paris: Seuil/Gallimard 2012, pp. 13–14.

7   Foucault: *Du gouvernement des vivants*, p. 49.

8   Ibid., pp. 80–81.

How does the truth oblige, in addition to the fact that it is manifested?"[9]. This objection contests the legitimacy of the concept of regime of truth arguing precisely that these two notions — 'regime' and 'truth' — cannot go together: it is not possible to speak of a regime of truth like we speak of a political or a penal regime. Here, Foucault clearly assumes the point of view of the dominant conception of truth in the West, that is an 'epistemological' point of view — the point of view of what he calls, in his lectures on *Psychiatric Power*, "truth-demonstration" as opposed to truth as an event.[10]

According to this perspective, truth, if it is really true, does not need a supplement of force, an *enforcement*, a supplement of vigor and constraint to be accepted. It is the truth, and that's all: truth is sufficient unto itself for making its own law — its coercive force resides within truth itself. "Truth itself determines its regime, makes the law, and obliges me. It is true, and I submit to it". So, as Foucault argues, "for something like an obligation to be added to the intrinsic rules of manifestation of the truth", it must "involve precisely something that cannot be manifested or demonstrated by itself as true". In other words, there can be no genuine truth 'obligation', no genuine 'regime' of truth: there can only be the "coercion of the non-true or the coercion and constraint of the unverifiable"[11] — because truth, if it is really true, is rather on the side of freedom, it emancipates and redeems instead of subjugating.

However, Foucault spells out this objection just in order to reject it. In fact, the truth is *index sui* — that is to say: in every 'game of truth' (considered from the point of view of its formal rules and not from the point of view of the individuals who are implicated in it) only the truth can legitimately establish the *partage* between true and false statements —, but it is not *rex sui*, *lex sui* or *judex sui*. On the contrary, the truth "is not creator and holder of the rights it exercises over human beings, of the obligations the latter have towards it, and of the effects they expect from these obligations when and insofar as they are fulfilled": it is not true "that the truth constrains only by truth". In other words, according to Foucault, *under* every argument, every reasoning and every 'evidence', there is always a certain assertion that does not belong to the logical realm, but is rather a sort of commitment, a *profession*, and which has the following form: "if it is true, then I will submit; it is true, *therefore* I submit". This 'therefore' that links the 'it is true' to the 'I submit' and gives the truth the right to say "you are forced to accept me because I am the truth", even if in some games of truth it is almost invisible, even if sometimes it goes so much without saying that we hardly notice its presence, well this 'therefore' does not rest itself on any truth or evidence and does not arise from the truth itself in its structure and content. This "you have to" of the truth is, according to Foucault, a "historical-cultural problem"[12]. Hence, while the rules of each game of truth define autonomously, *within* this specific game, the *partage* be-

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[9]   Ibid., p. 91.

[10]   Michel Foucault: *Le pouvoir psychiatrique. Cours au Collège de France 1973–1974*, ed. J. Lagrange, Paris: Seuil/Gallimard 2003, pp. 235–239; trans. G. Burchell: *Psychiatric Power. Lectures at the Collège de France. 1973–1974*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2006, pp. 235–239.

[11]   Foucault: *Du gouvernement des vivants*, pp. 92–93.

[12]   Ibid., pp. 94–95.

tween true and false statements, Foucault makes it clear that these rules are not themselves autonomous: on the contrary, they are always the result of a historical, social, cultural and ultimately 'political' production.

Three brief remarks before coming to the conclusion:

1) Foucault traces here, somehow implicitly, a distinction between 'game of truth' and 'regime of truth' — a distinction that becomes clear when (in a very Wittgensteinian way) he defines science as "a family of games of truth all of which submit to the same regime, although they are not subject to the same grammar, and this very specific, very particular regime of truth is a regime in which the power of the truth is organized in a way such that constraint is assured by truth itself"[13]. Nevertheless, science "is only one of the possible regimes of truth": there are "many other ways of binding the individual to the manifestation of truth"[14].

2) Even if we can trace a distinction between 'game' and 'regime' of truth, *there is no game of truth without or outside of a regime of truth*. In other words, no game of truth has the privilege of being 'pure': every game of truth is necessarily linked to a regime of truth that determines the obligations of the individuals who are implicated in it and thus accept — explicitly or not, consciously or not — the specific 'therefore' that links the 'it is true' and the 'I submit'.

3) This acceptance takes the form of a subjection (*assujettissement*) or of a subjectivation (*subjectivation*), since every regime of truth asks to the individuals who are implicated in it a specific *self-constitution*. For instance, in the case of Descartes, the subject can say "I think, therefore I am" *only if* he or she is "qualified in a certain way", that is *only if* he or she has constituted him or herself and has been constituted by his or her society as someone who is not mad.[15]

To conclude, I should note that, in *Du gouvernement des vivants*, Foucault at the same time and by the same move puts the concept of regime of truth at the heart of his historical study of Christianity *and* of his genealogical study of our contemporary regime of truth indexed to subjectivity. Thus, we cannot consider the concept of regime of truth as a merely analytical or methodological tool: it carries in itself a *critical* force, and this is why it can still be useful for us, today. In fact, through this concept, Foucault shows us that we are not obliged to accept the scientific or epistemological regime of truth, and more importantly that we are not obliged to shape our subjectivity and our way of life on it. On the contrary, we should try to choose other values (that may have nothing to do with truth) on which to shape ourselves. The idea that truth gives us no choice, that truth necessarily forces us to accept it and build up our conduct in accordance to it, is an extremely dangerous ethico-political *trap* that Foucault can help us to unmask and overcome.

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13 Ibid., p. 93.

14 Ibid., p. 97.

15 Ibid., p. 96.