THE SOVEREIGNTY OF WORDS

LUIZ CELSO PINHO

Associate Professor I at UFRuralRJ. Post-doctor in Ethics and Political Philosophy (PUC-PR).

ABSTRACT: The purpose of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* consists of establishing a homogeneous theoretical-conceptual basis for the historical-philosophical research that had preceded it: an Archaeology of perception, in the *History of Madness*; an archaeology of the medical gaze, in *The Birth of the Clinic*; and an archaeology of the human sciences, in *The Order of Things*. However, what is effectively at stake is a frontal refusal of the anthropological primacy in the field of history, philosophy and the studies that deal with the formation of the concept of man. And that is precisely because Foucault attributes to words an ontological dimension.

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Foucault writes *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) in order to reflect on the archaeological investigations carried out in *History of Madness* (1961), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963) and *The Order of Things* (1966). In these historical-philosophical researches it was always a form to give account, in original and provocative way, the emerging of forms of knowledge about the man in the Modern Age. However, as we examine the argumentative content of this archaeological reflection by reference to the major Foucauldian writings, we find out that we are dealing with a book permeated with unusual factors. In this sense, we can highlight four aspects.

Initially, his basic hypothesis was already contained in the pages of *The Order of Things* with the idea that there is autonomy, and even primacy, of the words in relation to those who utter them, which earned him the epithet of structuralist. In addition, it is the direct result of two essays written to clarify the questions raised by readers of *Sprit* magazine ("Reponse to a Question")[1] and students of the Paris Higher Normal School ("On

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[1] There were many questions, but Foucault favored the latter, precisely the one which referred to the insertion of structures in the historian's office: "Doesn't a thought which introduces constrain of the system and discontinuity in the history of the mind remove all basis for a progressive political intervention? Does it not lead to the following dilemma: either the acceptance of the system or the appeal to an uncontrolled event, to the irruption of exterior violence

the Archaeology of Sciences. Reponse to the Epistemology Circle").[2] It also develops a purely methodological reflection, created to homogenizing the nomenclature and concepts used in previous works on madness, medicine and the human sciences. Finally, only *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *Raymond Roussel*, the latter published in 1963 and centered on the philosophical status of literary discourse, are focused on the description of a form of knowledge that is based on language rather than subject.

II

With *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, the Foucauldian project of elaborating an archaeological history is, at the same time, consolidated and left aside. On the one hand, we verify the effort to clarify the assumptions that guide its innovative historical approach. On the other hand, Foucault always subordinates his methodological choices to the problem he is interested in. This is why we note that in the following works, focused on disciplinary and normalizing devices, history will be approached from the Nietzschean's genealogy.

Despite this changing style, we must not forget that *The Archaeology of Knowledge* explains out an invariable component in the Foucauldian *opus*. In its opening part (there is not an introduction properly), Foucault outlines a short treatise on how to write history from an archaeological perspective. Hence problematize questions such as: What kind of chain can be traced between events? What is a historical "document"? How should it be "interpreted"? How should the past be reconstituted?

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which alone is capable of upsetting the system?" (Foucault, M. "Réponse à une question" in **Dits é écrits**, I, p. 673).

[2] The question was about the problem of historical ruptures: "The author of *The Order of Things* identifies a vertical discontinuity between the epistemic configuration of one epoch and the next. We ask him: what relations obtain between this horizontality and this verticality?" (Sur l'archéologie des sciences. Réponse au Cercle d'épistémologie" in **Dits é écrits**, I, p. 696).

However, and this is what we intend to highlight, the guiding thread of it concerns to combat the privilege of the subject in the historical discourse. Archaeological analysis then denounces what can be understood as "the search for an original foundation that would make rationality the *telos* of mankind".[3] Foucault aims to put aside a whole set of notions that promote the theme of continuity, and units that are used in an thoughtless way: familiar statements such as science, literature, philosophy, religion, history, fiction and, more radically, the book, the work, and the author are no longer evidence and are questioned. "These pre-existing forms of continuity, all these syntheses that are accepted without question, must remain in suspense. They must not be rejected definitively of course, but the tranquillity with which they are accepted must be disturbed; we must show that they do not come about of themselves, but are always the result of a construction the rules of which must be known, and the justifications of which must be scrutinized: we must define in what conditions and in view of which analyses certain of them are legitimate; and we must indicate which of them can never be accepted in any circumstances".[4]

The criticism of these pre-established units is articulated with the imperative of removing from the subject the sovereignty that he held in an exclusive and instantaneous way about the discourse. If, on the one hand, archaeological writing is now defined as a procedure that describes dispersions to extract temporary systematics – the so-called discursive regularities –, on the other hand, it makes explicit the distance from the theme of a founding activity of the subject in which the history is conceived in terms of *genesis*, *continuity* and *totalization*.

Archaeology incorporates the programmatic guideline of "do not ignore any form of discontinuity, break, threshold, or limit".[5] Thus, to what can be interpreted as a refusal of the historicity of things, Foucault replies that "what is being bewailed

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[3] Foucault, M. **L'archéologie du savoir**, p. 22.

[4] Ib., p. 37.

[5] Ib., p. 44.

with such vehemence is not the disappearance of history, but the eclipse of that form of history that was secretly, but entirely related to the synthetic activity of the subject; what is being bewailed is the 'development' that was to provide the sovereignty of the consciousness with a safer, less exposed shelter than myths, kinship systems, languages, sexuality, or desire; what is being bewailed is the possibility of reanimating through the project, the work of meaning, or the movement of totalization, the interplay of material determinations, rules of practice, unconscious systems, rigorous but unreflected relations, correlations that elude all lived experience; what is being bewailed is that ideological use of history by which one tries to restore to man everything that has unceasingly eluded him for over a hundred years".[6]

While the historian's activity rests on the quiet sleep propitiated by the notions of original unity, temporal continuity, and teleological horizon, the intention is to preserve "against all

decentrings, the sovereignty of the subject, and the twin figures of anthropology and humanism"[7] Foucault aims "to free the history of thought from its subjection to transcendence" in order to analyse it "in the discontinuity that no teleology would reduce in advance; to map it in a dispersion that no pre-established horizon would embrace; to allow it to be deployed in an anonymity on which no transcendental constitution would impose the form of the subject; to open it up to a temporality that would not promise the return of any dawn".[8]

When Foucault chooses the notion of statement [*énoncé*], in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, as the "atom of discourse",[9] which will serve as a starting point for the philosopher-historian, he wants to operate "certain change of viewpoint and attitude".[10] Although this posture can still be associated with a naïve subjectivism, it is necessary to take into

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[6] Ib., p. 24.

[7] Ib., p. 22.
[8] Ib., p. 264-5.
[9] Ib., p. 107.
[10] Ib., p. 145.

account that Foucault does not seek to describe elementary units, but rather resize the whole practice of thinking based on ready and finished categories. This precept keeps him away from the undesirable neighborhood with anthropological thought, denounced by him as a new and insidious modality of dogmatism in *The Order of Things*.

Thus, this "conversion" intends to neutralize the existence of anthropological notions within the historical account, philosophical reflection and theories of the human sciences. The starting point of Foucauldian archaeology is to treat discourses according to the principle of dispersion, rather than giving them a prior nature that should not be questioned. It is about "to restore to the statement his specificity of happening",[11] breaking the familiarity that linked the past with the historian's memory.[12]

Throughout *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault argues for the programmatic demand to restore to the history of discourses "a dispersion that can never be reduced to a single system of differences, a scattering that is not related to absolute axes of reference; it is trying to operate *a decentring that leaves no privilege to any centre*".[13]

By locating in history "the last resting-place of anthropological thought",[14] archaeology intends to remove from the subject the sovereignty acquired by him in the discursive sphere.

III

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[11] Ib., p. 40.

[12] This is what Serres notes when he states that "the archaeologist comes back into history as if it had been written in a language that is no longer dead, forgotten, abandoned science; he suspends this instinctive recurrence that unites the investigator and his object, he nullifies this flow of communication that makes possible a community of culture between the historian and the history" (Serres, M. "Le retour de la nef" in **Hermès ou la communication**, p. 198).

[13] Foucault, M. **L'archéologie du savoir**, p. 268, my emphasis.

[14] Ib., p. 24.

This decentralization is fundamentally inspired by a literary experience. Foucault aims to discuss the philosophical status of language in the History of Thought by taking as reference other theoretical parameters. As Roberto Machado points out, we verify in him the apology of a type of literature "which is pure language, which only speaks of itself, which expresses no preexisting reality".[15]

A good example of this approach is Foucault's reading of the french writer Raymond Roussel, since his narratives reveal what would be the "inner space of language", the "secret architecture of words".[16] It is not any kind of phenomenological intuition or hermeneutic revelation. The archaeological primacy of the discursive level requires the existence of a space "from-outside [*dehors*] in which the speaking subject disappears".[17]

And it is in this region of knowledge that words are sovereign, independent and owners of a truth that refers only to themselves.

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[15] Machado, R. **Foucault, a filosofia, a literatura**, p. 113.

[16] Foucault, M. "Dire et voir chez Raymond Roussel", in **Dits et écrits**, I, p. 211 e p. 213.

[17] Foucault, M. "La pensée du dehors" in **Dits et écrits**, I, p. 520.