

Editorial

Having completed just over half of his Collège de France lectures from the 1973-1974 semester, Michel Foucault decided to ‘open a parenthesis’ at that point and to ‘insert a little history of truth in general’.¹ Without intending to do so, this digression explained the nature of the work of those venerable people who prepare and decide the hardest legal cases. That nature is *alchemy*, the art of transformation.²

I also realised that the researcher is a kind of alchemist as well, although pale and bookish in comparison to the idols she/he worships. Yet we are powerless to break the spell of our enthusiasm (it creeps into our dreams while we sleep) about those magical books, the legal dossiers which report the proceedings of our Master Wizards in gnostic cipher. We crave finding out how they spun lead into gold.

Let me explain what Foucault said.

Think of clouds. Everywhere behind the clouds is *the sky*, the vault of heaven, the firmament. This is the tranquillity of the astronomic universe, the sphere next to God. On its stage pass the joyful but harmoniously recurring constellations of the heavenly bodies – that is, a display of never-changing knowledge, the amazing, wonderful, eternal and universal truth. This is the truth-sky, which Foucault holds as the dominating form, model and type of truth today.

Now, compare the sky behind the clouds to *a thunderbolt*: a thunderbolt that plunges from a cloud, the spear of Zeus that angrily splits the sky asunder, divides it for a moment with an incomprehensible load of energy, then conjoins a deafening sound of crack, and a boom that rumbles the earth and everything on it. All is over within an eye-blink. This image, also, describes a form (model, type) of truth for Foucault: the truth-thunderbolt.

¹ His lecture of 23 January in *Psychiatric Power*, 235-247, 235.

² *Al-kimia* (Arabic), ‘the art of transformation’.

The truth-sky concerns knowledge discovered, attested and established through methods. These methods are the technology of the demonstration of knowledge, the practice of which has finally culminated in modern science, which disseminates everywhere the idea of universal and eternal truth, truth as the sky-behind-the-clouds. Modern science also establishes and presumes, with seeming parity among all walks of life, the universal subject of knowledge: everyone has the right and the obligation to comprehend. The technologies of demonstration and of certified observation are based on the subject-object relationship, a relationship which is also the product of the practice of those technologies. Today, one can hardly think of knowledge in any other way but through the model of truth-sky.

The truth, if it exists, is *everywhere, always* and for *everyone*. This is the present situation, but it has not always been as it is now. The truth used to be the truth-thunderbolt, a more ancient form of truth that begins to ebb at a certain point of history, when the truth-sky begins to dominate. We speak of the era of oracles and prophets, sorcerers and shamans, ordeals and omens.

Unlike the truth-sky, which is omnipresent, eternal and for everyone, the truth-thunderbolt has its *geography, calendar* and *messengers*. Each place has its own truth, and the truths of these different places are incompatible; they make no solid universes. On the contrary, such truths bolster armies to fight terrible wars. Moreover, only special and rare moments are propitious enough to arouse and 'hunt down' the truth. One will always require the right timing. In any case, the next time such truth appears, it will be different. Finally, only the very few possess the magic powers and know the proper rituals to provoke and to capture a truth-thunderbolt.

This counter-positioning of forms of truth inspires Foucault to outline a two-fold thesis: firstly, the truth-sky *derives* from the truth-thunderbolt; secondly, the truth-sky – even today – is only one *aspect, region and modality* of the truth-thunderbolt. The truth-thunderbolt has not passed away without a trace, he says, but remains. It may be suppressed and dominated by the truth-sky, but it has nonetheless survived in our civilization. This suggestion is the momentum of Foucault's move towards an *archaeology of knowledge* and is commissioned to elaborate upon three theses, or recoveries: the scientific demonstration is a ritual, the universal subject is a historically qualified individual, and the discovery of truth is the production of truth. The *genealogy of knowledge*, in turn, would be to show how, throughout the course of history, the Sky colonised and tyrannised the Thunderbolt.

Foucault takes up three historical practices to expound on the truth-thunderbolt: juridical practice, the practice of alchemy, and medical practice. Let me explain briefly what Foucault says of these practices.

For Foucault's purposes, historical juridical practice is epitomised in the institution of ordeals, or 'God's judgement', and the practice of torturing suspected violator-sinners in order to extract confessions. Neither of these, according to Foucault, is practised to discover matters of fact in the modern sense of the production of evidence. Rather, the ordeal involves 'procedures governing how to determine a victor in a confrontation between two individuals', whereas the practice of torture 'involved the judge and the person accused or suspected in a real physical struggle [...] to find out whether or not the suspect would stand up to it' (240). These practices did not rely on 'demonstrative proof'; in the end, one or the other of the parties had simply 'lost in the game, in the confrontation, and could consequently be sentenced' (240). Thus, the truth of things is exactly what emerges from the proceedings, through the confrontation, and nothing external to it.

The practice of alchemy, in turn, is firmly tied to the thunderbolt type of truth. It 'never has corresponded,' says Foucault, 'to the technology of demonstrative truth' as the science of chemistry does (240-241). Foucault points out three aspects of alchemy. Firstly, the one who wishes to produce alchemic reactions must be initiated to the practice. That is, one must be in the possession of the 'moral or ascetic qualification' gained 'by the fact that he really has gone through the required ritual' (241). Secondly, what pertains to worked-out knowledge, as to alchemy, in no way includes the end-products of the experiments, the recorded data upon which systems, such as those of chemistry, could be built. Rather, 'the *opus* is the ritual staging of certain events, which, according to a certain margin of luck, chance, or blessing, may include, may possibly include, the truth' (241). Thirdly, after conducting an alchemical experiment, the way in which everything happened remains ultimately enigmatic to the protagonists themselves: the 'alchemical knowledge is always knowledge that is lost'; it does not accumulate. One will have to 'start again from zero' every time (240).

Lastly, Foucault discusses what is known as the medicine of crises, which survived as a form of thunderbolt-knowledge in medical practice even through the time during which the demonstrative truth-sky took over medical theory. The notion of crisis points to the 'moment at which the evolution of the disease risks being resolved, that is to say, risks the decision of life or death'. The crisis is 'the point at which the battle' between 'Nature and Evil' is decided. The doctor must be ready to recognise the crisis, be all the time on the alert for it. The doc-

tor must struggle not only against the progress of the disease, but for the ‘governance of the forces that are at play’ in the fight between life and death. ‘Now when the crisis occurs, the disease breaks out in its truth [...], appears in its own truth, its intrinsic truth. [...] And it is precisely then that the doctor must intervene [...] engage in battle to defeat the disease [...] so that the nature triumphs over disease’ (243). In other words, the ‘doctor must foresee the crisis, know the opposing forces, imagine its outcome, and arrange things so that it occurs at the right time’ (244).

The technique of the medicine of crises, says Foucault, ‘is no different from the technique of a judge or arbitrator in a judicial dispute’ (244). And, we might add, the technique of alchemy is no different from the practice of law; and furthermore, this practice still harbours, in its deeper archaeological sedimentation, something of its prototype forbears, the ordeals and the torture. All in all, a considerable dose of thunderbolt-type truth-production exists in legal practice today.

17 April 2009

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References

Foucault, Michel: *Psychiatric Power. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1973-1974*. Ed. by Jacques Lagrange., transl. Graham Burchell. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke and New York 2006.