Foucault's Late Theory: Politics and Thought

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Abstract

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Recent literature has claimed that Michel Foucault's late work amounts to a rejection of politics and an embracing of a neoliberal logic and an individualizing ethics. This thesis is situated in a response to this recent literature which reads in Foucault's late work several political commitments and avenues for investigation that remained unfinished. Specifically, this thesis examines two understandings of politics in the work of Foucault: politics as civil war and politics as singular thought. The introduction situates this thesis's content in the context of the crisis of Marxism in the 1960s through to the 1980s, as Marxist conceptions and practices of politics began to meet their limits. The first chapter of this thesis traces the development of an initial concept of politics as civil war in Foucault's work over the course of several years utilizing a method of reading from Étienne Balibar's examination of the same concept in the work of Karl Marx. The second chapter of this thesis provides a comparative reading of the work of Sylvain Lazarus and the later work of Michel Foucault to illuminate their differing concepts of singularity and the irreducibility of politics. Reading Lazarus's critique of Foucault's conception of singularity presented in *The Order of Things* and an exchange between Foucault and a group known as the Cercle d'Épistémologie points the way to Foucault's late work on spirituality and the transformable subject and a new theory of politics as singular thought founded on a political spirituality and a rupture of the everyday.

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Introduction: The Crisis of Marxism

In November 1977, the Italian radical newspaper *Il Manifesto* organized a conference in Venice on the problems facing the western communist movement in their relationship to the socialist states of Eastern Europe and Asia entitled *Power and Opposition in Post-Revolutionary Societies* (Haider, 2017). Speaking at the conference, the philosopher Louis Althusser said, referencing statements made the previous day by workers from a Fiat factory in Turin present at the conference, that the problem was the sense that "something has 'snapped' in the history of the labour movement between its past and present, something which makes its future unsure" (1979, p. 226). He would go on to elaborate that this crisis consisted precisely in the fact that the Soviet Union of the 1970s no longer represented, for workers and militants in the western European countries, the continuation of the revolutionary movement of October 1917. This crisis of identification with the communist project had obvious significance for Marxist theory, of whom Althusser was among the most committed partisans, as it would necessarily mean a crisis of legitimation for a discourse which claimed to interpret and guide that project.

For Althusser, the theoretical problem consisted precisely in the fact that in Marxist discourse there existed "two theoretical gaps of great importance: on the one hand on the state, on the other hand on the organizations for prosecuting the class struggle" (1979, p. 234). It was one thing for Marxism to claim to be a science which could analyze the development and inner logic of the capitalist mode of production, it was another thing entirely to derive political concepts from this analysis. Put differently, in Marxism there existed two concepts which shared the same name, the proletariat which existed in an economic relationship to capital and the proletariat, as political subject, which could act collectively to abolish that relationship

(Mohandesi, 2013). Marxism had not until then elaborated a concept of politics adequate to the world of the latter half of the twentieth century. This problem had been recognized by others in the European Marxist milieu of the 60s and 70s, implicitly or explicitly, through debates around the concept of political organization which by their nature also became critiques of the strategy of the Western European communist parties (Haider, 2018).

However, even beyond party leaders and official party theoreticians, not everyone was receptive to discussion of the inadequacies of the concept of politics in Marxism. In the immediate aftermath of Althusser's conference presentation, Perry Anderson, editor of the influential *New Left Review* and therefore representative of a certain flavour of Anglo-American Marxist opinion, castigated Althusser for his "dilution or diminution" of Marxist theory and accused him of "an increasing scepticism towards the very idea of a revolutionary rupture with capitalism" (1983, p. 29). He even went as far as to suggest a malign influence clouding Althusser's usually keen read of the conjuncture, writing that "the shadow of Michel Foucault, soon proclaiming the 'end of politics'… no doubt lay heavily on these Parisian doubts" (1983, p. 30).

My thesis begins from the premise that Michel Foucault's later work played an important role in these debates during the period of the crisis of Marxism. However, rather than advocating a retreat from politics entirety, we will explore how his late work attempted to formulate a new concept of politics in a moment of political crisis. Some in recent years have suggested that Foucault's critique of Marxism and descriptive investigations into neoliberalism amount to an endorsement of a politics of individuation and entrepreneurialism (Dean & Zamora, 2021; Zamora & Behrent, 2016). Against this interpretation, we will explore how a concept of politics emerged in Foucault's late work in two ways. First, we will read Foucault's investigations of

politics as class and civil war in the 1970s to examine Foucault's grappling with the limits of this political discourse. Then, we will read Foucault's work on spirituality and self-transformation through the work of the political theorist Sylvain Lazarus in order to consider how Foucault's later work may point the way towards a renewed possibility for conceptualizing emancipatory politics. A conceptualization based in the transformation of political subjects through individual and collective practices and the relation between transformation and singularity. In this introductory chapter, we will review the relevant literature on the crisis of Marxism and Foucault's late work, situate my reading of his work is in these literatures, as well as outline my research questions, my research methods, and my thesis format.

Literature Review: Foucault's Late Period and Politics

Foucault's later work has already been situated by some (see Chitty, 2012 and Jessop, 2007) in the context of the 'crisis of Marxism', specifically in the aftermath of ferment of May 1968 in France, where the response of the French Communist Party to the student movement came under intense criticism from many committed to radical politics. Foucault's relationship to Marxism was complicated, with his orientation toward it changing multiple times over the course of his decades long career, which is why it is important to situate my thesis in a specific period of his intellectual production. His early work, like that of many philosophers in France in the 1940s and 50s, was initially sympathetic to Marxist theory. From 1948-1953 onward, as a student of Louis Althusser who was at the time the director of studies in Philosophy at the École Normale Superior, Foucault was a member of the French Communist Party (Elden, 2021, p. 24). Recent archival work has even gone as far as to demonstrate that Althusser's famous concept of the epistemological break, the argument that the scientific work of the mature Karl Marx dealt with an entirely different problematic than that of the younger Marx, may have been partially a

product of the academic exchange between Foucault and Althusser during those years at the ENS (Vuillerod, 2019).

In 1971, recalling this period and his relationship to the Marxism of the French Communist Party, Foucault (2013) said:

> When I was young and those problems started to preoccupy me, as a matter of course like many students of my generation I belonged to the communist party. For I thought that there in Marxism we have first an analysis of both the historical and unconscious roots of knowledge, and at the same time Marxism promises a "dis-alienation" of man, that is to say a liberation of man. In freeing man, Marxism was giving us the totality of knowledge. But it seemed to me that the way Marxism was understood by the French communist party and presumably by the Soviet Union, that brand of Marxism was nothing but the recycling of both a certain traditional idea—that is, a bourgeois idea of man—and of knowledge as it had been constructed based on that morality, based on that society, based on the imperatives of a bourgeois capitalist society. (p. 33)

It was this foundation in the concept of man, as defined the modern episteme, that prompted Foucault to explicitly consign Marxism to the nineteenth century "like a fish in water…unable to breathe anywhere else" (Foucault, 2006, p. 285). In the 1970s Foucault would return to Marx as a thinker, if not explicitly to Marxism as a discourse, and to several of the conceptual problems that Althusser noted as being present in Marxist theory (Elden, 2017a). Most notable was his suggestion that there existed no form of socialist governmentality, due to the fact that socialist and communist parties had attempted to fit Marx, a thinker Foucault read

for his investigation into the dispersed workings of power, into a juridical frame which saw power as concentrated in the bourgeois state (Chitty, 2012). Later, Foucault would turn to an analysis of governmentality before ostensibly abandoning the critique of Marxism, politics, and power for an investigation into Christianity and classical antiquity (Elden, 2017b).

It is this late period that deserves more attention for its political implications. My thesis will define as "late" the period from August 1974 to June 1984, bookended by the completion of *Discipline and Punish* and Foucault's death, which was as Stuart Elden writes "one of the most fascinating in Foucault's career (Elden, 2017, p. 1). In the course of this ten year period, Foucault will move from the most developed demonstration of his genealogical method to a fallow period of relatively few published works in the late 1970s followed by a turn to an investigation of truth and spirituality in "texts he had never even mentioned before, in periods that had not been his preferred focus in the past" (Elden, 2017, p. 1).

The relation between Foucault and Marxism (and between Foucault and Marx) has been explored widely in the past. Bidet (2016) attempted to combine Marx's critiques of capitalist markets and property and Foucault's critical investigation into power and organization into a holistic critical theory. Contributors to Crampton and Elden (2007) explored the relevance of Foucault for Marxist, Feminist, and Anti-Racist anglophone geographies through a reading of an exchange between Foucault and the French geography journal, Hérodote. Oksala (2011) used Foucault to interrogate the relationship between politics and violence, arguing that while politics implies conflict, violent conflict is a contingent historical feature of politics rather than an ontological necessity. Kelly (2014) surveyed the role of politics across the entire sweep of Foucault's work. Similarly comprehensive but with a focus on Foucault's investigations into the conditions of knowledge, Han (2002) argues that Foucault's project can be conceived of as an

attempt to conceptualize knowledge outside the economic determination of Marxism but without recourse to a foundation in a transcendental subject. Balibar (1992) recognized the antinomy between Marx and Foucault due to Foucault's commitment to a strict nominalism. Though Balibar advised putting this antinomy to work, writing of an "immense advantage" in using Foucault's theory as "a point of leverage" to critique the formulations of Marx (1992, p. 56).

My thesis research into the question of the politics of Foucault's intellectual trajectory contributes to a recent upswing in literature on Foucault which seeks to frame Foucault's work, and especially the last decade of this work, as a sign, if not a cause, of a then-incipient neoliberal regime of deregulation and disassembling of post-war welfare states, as well as a turn inward from contesting political space to a preoccupation with the self. Coinciding with recent work on the intellectual history of neoliberalism (for a review of recent trends in Intellectual and Social History of Neoliberalism see Mulder, 2023), this literature has been particularly focused on asserting a relationship between the late work of Michael Foucault and emerging schools of thought and political organizations that would soon fall under the banner of French neoliberalism. The edited volume *Foucault and Neoliberalism* (Zamora & Behrent, 2016) was exemplary in this respect. Tiisala (2021) argues Foucault's interest in the neoliberal economist Gary Becker came from a shared commitment to non-normalization in the penal system, but faults Foucault for excluding economic justice from his analysis. Among this recent literature was a noteworthy book by Dean and Zamora (2021) which sought to make a connection between Foucault's turn to the investigation of classical antiquity, his relation to anti-communist thinkers curious about the possibilities that neoliberal governance offered to the left in France, and an LSD experience in Death Valley. *Foucault, Neoliberalism, and Beyond* (Sawyer &

Steinmetz-Jenkins, 2019) attempted to clarify and complicate this new reception, while pointing the way for the continued relevance of Foucault and the application of his work.

Responding to this spate of recent literature linking Foucault's late thought and politics to an emerging neoliberal consensus, the contributors to a special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly*, edited by Gavin Walker (2022a), sought to challenge the narrative of a strictly anti-Marxist Foucault through a reading of Foucault's last several years of intellectual production. As my thesis is situated in this context, an exploration of these contributions in greater detail is warranted. Sotiris (2022) compares Foucault's research into governmentality to the work of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's writing on hegemony to ask whether his research "can be of help in any attempt to rethink a politics of emancipation in a communist horizon" even though, on first glance, it is quite distant from a Marxist idiom (p. 822). Sotiris sees in Foucault's lectures on *parrhēsia* an "ethics of collective militancy" (p. 826) to guide a practice of the "art of collective self-government" (p. 824), which involves the creation of spaces of autonomy and experimentation within any real movement for social transformation.

Revel (2022) finds Foucault, in his last lecture course at the Collège de France in 1984, noting that a certain "form of life" (p. 738) at first unique to the Cynics, a school of ancient Greek philosophy, seems to outlast them and continue on in history. Relating this to Foucault's writing on modernity as an "attitude" (p. 742) that could persist across radically different epochs, another notion suggesting a form of transcendence in the work of the usually strict historicizing Foucault, Revel finds not an "exit from history" (p. 743) but the ever-present possibility of experiment and invention of new subjectivities. Kawashima (2022) argues that the late Foucault's "analysis of *diakrisis* (discrimination), *epimeleia heautou* (care of the self), and *metanoia* (conversion to revolution)" resonate with Marx's concern with subjective

transformation and socioeconomic transition and can inform the struggle for "economic sovereignty" at the level of the self, of others, and of the state (p. 694). For Noys (2022), Foucault's late work suggests a role for philosophy, in a world of crisis and transition mirroring the ancient Greek and Roman world Foucault studies in his lectures, as a practice for interrogating the relationship between truth and knowledge rather than one which is concerned only with a will to power.

Toscano (2022) relates Foucault's reading of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* on the themes of judicial truth to Foucault's activism and writing on legal defense in the late 1980s. Toscano writes that Foucault sought to reveal the conflict that lay beneath the apparent neutrality of the law. Meanwhile, Ichida (2022) reads Foucault reading *Oedipus Rex* to argue a distinction between Foucault, in contradistinction to Deleuze and Guattari, in his focus on truth and on the act of speech. Haider (2022) situates Foucault's late work and politics in the context of the failure of the "great twentieth-century revolutions and the transitional societies that emerged from them" (p. 804) to achieve emancipation to argue that Foucault's critical relationship both to political dogma and to drugs can be understood as *ask-esis*, a "mode of orienting oneself to the truth" (p. 811). An orientation even more necessary in times of political pessimism and retreat. Oksala finds in Foucault's late work on Governmentality and in his journalistic reports from the revolution in Iran a Foucault fascinated by the concept of "political spirituality" (2022, p. 666) which he then argues was a necessary force in past secular revolutionary movements, and likely will be in future movements as well. Walker (2022b) writes of Foucault's attempt, in the years after the publication of Discipline and Punish but before the turn to the investigation of truth, to think outside the Marxist "logic of contradiction" and its appeals to historical necessity (p. 722) by conceptualizing politics as a "logic of strategy" (p. 723), which has as its basis the articulation

of "'possible connections between disparate terms'…which will have no necessary combination" (p. 724).

Étienne Balibar and Politics as Civil War

My own inquiry into the late work of Foucault proceeds in two parts. The first focuses on the years from 1971 to 1977, when Foucault busied himself with an annual series of lectures at the Collège de France and completed both *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*. These were the years when Foucault completed his most intensive genealogies of power, subjectification, and politics. It is in his lectures and interviews from this period that Foucault undertook a wide-ranging and rigorous investigation into the concept of civil war. This chapter reads these investigations to find that Foucault developed a notion of politics as the process and practice of civil war in society.

Providing the framework for this chapter is another investigation of the relation between politics and civil war in the thought of another thinker, Karl Marx. In an appendix to his book, *The Philosophy of Marx* (2017), Etienne Balibar, a student of Althusser and contributor to the seminar which produced Reading Capital (Althusser et al., 2015), investigates the concept of politics in the thought of Marx, a concept which he claims is inextricable from the concept of class struggle. Reading the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx & Engels, 2019) and the first volume of *Capital* (Marx, 2024), Balibar finds the concept of class struggle, an irreconcilable antagonism within society, to be both the foundation of Marx's concept of politics and intimately related to the concept of civil war. As Balibar (2019) identifies, there are "two competing 'models' to think and represent politics: war (and more generally conflict, or struggle, as in Machiavelli) and commerce (in the broad sense this term had in the classical age, for example in Kant and

Montesquieu)" (p. 99). Rejecting the "political theory of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" based upon "mercantile society…represented as a contractual association of isolated juridical subjects" (Foucault, 1977, p. 194), Foucault's genealogy of the concept of a class struggle and his investigation into the concept of civil war can be read as constituting an attempt to think through and against the Marxist concept of politics and its associated implications.

Sylvain Lazarus and Singularity

The second part of my research concerns the moment when Foucault moves on from his work on governmentality and civil war to begin an investigation into early Christian practices of truth-telling and the ancient Greek concept of *parrēsia* (Elden, 2017b). The immediate political relevance of this late historical and theoretical work is initially unclear. However, when brought into conversation with the work of another post-Marxist theorist of politics, Sylvain Lazarus, a political reading of this work is possible.

Lazarus was involved to one degree or another in various Maoist and post-Leninist political groupings that comprised the French left in the years after May 1968 (Lazarus, 2019). Reacting to what he saw as the tendency of Marxist discourse to make the investigation of actually existing politics more difficult through its commitment to a specific political logic given in advance, he proposed a re-founding of the concept of politics. For Lazarus, politics is best understood not as 'commerce' or 'war' but as thought. Importantly for Lazarus, this is not a thought imposed upon political action from the outside but a thought coming from the subject of politics (Lazarus, 2016). Lazarus' political theory is based upon two statements: the first statement is that "people think" and the second is that "thought is a relation of the real" (2015, p. 53). By this, Lazarus means that emancipatory politics can only happen because people, the

subject of politics, have the capacity to think new things about their situation and that these thoughts can exist without grounding them in the authority of science or theory or a pre-existing academic discourse. Lazarus also makes two more claims that have relevance for the study of past instances of politics and for new possibilities in politics: that emancipatory politics occurs in a sequence, with a definite beginning and end, and that emancipatory politics is rare (Lazarus, 2016).

Sylvain Lazarus is underexplored in geography (Doucette, 2020) and for the most part, he and his key work *The Anthropology of the Name* (2015) are addressed in relation to his more well-known collaborator Alain Badiou (see for example Bosteels, 2011). However, as Doniger (2021) notes, Lazarus and Badiou diverge theoretically in key aspects, most notably in Lazarus's commitment to a concept of enthusiasm against Badiou's notion of fidelity. This has relevance for the end of political sequences which for Lazarus can leave a place where politics occurred that has relevance for political investigation (Doniger, 2021).

Lazarus's effort to provide a new foundation for the thinking of politics attempts to address many of the problems of the historical course of Marxist politics and, importantly, offers a productive frame in which to read the late work of Foucault. The groundwork for this investigation will be set through an analysis of his reading of Foucault's *The Order of Things* in the *Anthropology of the Name* (2015). In this work, he credits Foucault as the "first theoretician of singularities" (p. 87) before accusing him of neglecting to interrogate his own position as theorist in relation to the epistemes he discovers, making reference to an exchange that Foucault had with an organization known as the Cercle d'Épistémologie in the ninth volume of the *Cahiers pour l'analyse* (p. 88).

The introduction of the Cercle also allows us to further contextualize the political world of Lazarus and Foucault. The political and intellectual scene of post-war France of the 1950s and 1960s was in large part dominated by the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) and associated intellectuals and academics. Louis Althusser, at the École Normale Superior (ENS) in Paris, was one such academic and his seminars in the mid-1960s drew crowds of students with a "collective enthusiasm occasionally bordering on exaltation" (Hallward, 2012, p. 21). These students would soon occupy a majority of the ENS's Union des Étudiants Communistes (UEC), the PCF's student wing, and would found a journal known as the *Cahiers Marxistes-Leninistes* for the diffusion of Althusserian Marxism. 1965 marked a decisive year when the Sino-Soviet split and recriminations within the PCF over the political direction of the party and the status of 'humanism' would lead to the censure of Althusser and his students. A significant part of the more radical students of the UEC and the editors of the *Cahiers Marxistes-Leninistes* (CML) would go on to split and found the Union des Jeunesses Communistes – marxistes-léninistes, the "first openly Maoist student organization in France" (Hallward, 2012, p. 26). They would go on to take the CML in a more explicitly Maoist direction, "prioritizing political practice" and "detailed 'investigations'…of the political terrain", a formulation that has clear resonances with the work of Lazarus (Hallward, 2012, pp. 28, 51).

In reaction to this, more theoretically minded students of Althusser and Lacan would go on to form the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* with a greater focus on structuralism and epistemology. May 1968 represented a watershed moment in which a sudden uprising of students and workers failed to cohere and was even pacified by the PCF, more committed to a parliamentary road to socialism. Out of this sprang more Maoist groups, including Gauche Prolétariennne, whom had close contact with Foucault through the Groupe d'information sur les prisons (Elden, 2017a, p.

129). Badiou and Lazarus for their part would be prominent members of the smaller Union des Communistes de France Marxiste-Léniniste (Hallward & Badiou, 2012, p. 286) before later forming a group called L'Organization politique (Lazarus, 2015, p. xviii) that would dedicate itself to political inquiry and agitating among, for example, immigrant workers in automotive manufacturing (Lazarus, 2019).

Returning to the exchange between the Cercle and Foucault in the pages of the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, Stuart (2023), whose discussion of this passage pointed me in the direction of Peden (2012), who argues that the critique of *The Order of Things* by the Cercle points to a problem in Foucault's method of archaeology: Foucault "leaves vague the place from which the multiplicity of epistemes is stated" (Lazarus, 2015, p. 88). Stuart asserts that Foucault demonstrates an "intellectual avoidance" of this theoretical problem by making a methodological shift from archaeology to genealogy, moving from an analysis of breaks and singularity to one of continuity (2023, p. 1). For Stuart (2023), "a theory of singularity is a theory of subjectivity" (p. 11) and Foucault is not able to present an adequate theory of subjectivity in *The Order of Things* or in his response to the Cercle in the late 1960s.

However, it is precisely Foucault's late work on spirituality and truth that constitutes a return to the theoretical problem of singularity and subjectivity. As Peden (2012) argues, Foucault's turn to the study of classical antiquity and truth in his late work can be read as a belated response to the Cercle's questions. Foucault, influenced by the philosopher Pierre Hadot's (Hadot, 2001) work on spiritual exercises in ancient Greece, conceptualizes a subject that is transformable, whose "spiritual (practical) exercises are what provide it with access to the (discursive) truth of philosophy" (Peden, 2012, p. 72). While Peden argues this point in order to bring to light Foucault's theoretical affinities to Lacan, Foucault's notion of a self-transformable

subject can also be read in explicitly political terms in a way that bears considerable similarity to Lazarus's thinking on singularity while also providing a different conception of subjectivity. Lazarus's work, then, provides a framework for re-reading Foucault's late work (1980-1984), a reading that contributes to other readings that stress the political perspective of this period in Foucault's intellectual production. When read in conversation with Foucault's inquiry into the course of the Iranian Revolution, Foucault's late thinking on the relationship between politics, spirituality, and singularity can be elaborated.

Thesis Outline: Foucault's Two Politics

My thesis research into the possibility of emancipatory politics in the work of Michel Foucault proceeds in two chapters. The first chapter features a close reading of Foucault's investigations into the concept of civil war and suggests that Foucault was attempting to think through the implications of a Marxist theory of politics, to extend it, and to arrive at a more generative understanding of a politics based in an underlying antagonism. Reading Foucault's readings of other thinkers of civil war like Thomas Hobbes, allows us to distinguish his concept. The chapter also examines Foucault's eventual critique of his own concept through a genealogy of the discourse of civil war. We are left with a Foucault in search of a new conception of politics, one that isn't drawn from the model of war.

The second chapter of my thesis presents a comparative reading of the work of the political theorist Lazarus and Foucault. First the rudiments of Lazarus's political thinking are introduced. This is followed by a reading of Lazarus's reading of Foucault's *The Order of Things* with the supplement of an exchange between Foucault and a group of editors in the pages of the *Cahiers pour* l'Analyse to fully elucidate the stakes of Lazarus's critique of Foucault's concept

of singularity. This critique is then addressed through a reading of Foucault's late work on spirituality and the subject. Finally, the chapter examines Foucault's political inquiry of a political movement in progress in Iran at the time of the Revolution in 1978-79. We will read in this inquiry the development of a new concept of politics based in a political spirituality and singular thought.

1 Civil War

In an essay titled "The End of Politics or Politics without End? Marx and the Aporia of 'Communist Politics'", Etienne Balibar proposes an investigation into the conceptual relationship between the aim of Marxist politics and the thesis of the ending of politics. He does this through a reading of two of Marx's texts, *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx & Engels, 2019) and *Capital Volume I* (Marx, 2024). He begins with Marx's (Marx & Engels, 2019) contention that it is necessary for the proletariat, as a class, to win the "battle of democracy" (p. 80) through the "conquest of political power" (p. 74). Through his formulation, Balibar notes, Marx creates a "close association…between the process of conquering democracy and the requisite utilization of revolutionary violence to transform the property and production regime that creates class antagonism" (Balibar, 2017, p. 160). What creates the most theoretical trouble for Balibar here is the specific effect on the state of politics that Marx asserts will result from this process. It is an effect that Balibar believes has had profound practical political effects on the historical course of the Marxist movement in the twentieth century. That specific effect on the state of politics is the process by which, after the seizure of the state apparatus by the proletariat is accomplished, "class distinctions have disappeared, and all production has been concentrated in the hands of a vast association…the public power will lose its political character" (Marx & Engels, 2019, p. 81). For Balibar this "eschatological postulate of an 'end of politics'" created a "profound obscurity" around the concepts of power and the state in Marxist discourse (Balibar, 2017, p. 162). For Balibar (2017):

> The driving and steering role of class struggle in history cannot be dissociated from the fact that it is irreducible to any of the definitions and forms of institution of 'politics' to be found under this name in history, and for the first time confers

> on politics a capacity to act on its own conditions and transform them…its relation to politics is constitutive and yet incomprehensible. It is both and end and a beginning or re-commencement. (p. 162)

This problem of Marxist politics is made all the more difficult for Balibar by the fact that, he argues, "Marx established a parallel and even a definitional equation between the notions of *class struggle* and *civil war*" [emphasis original] (Balibar, 2017, p. 163). This is visible in the *Manifesto,* where Marx spoke of the "more or less veiled civil war, raging within existing society" (Marx & Engels, 2019, p. 72). This war, as social antagonism sharpens, then "breaks out into open revolution" and ends with "the violent overthrow of the proletariat" (Marx & Engels, 2019, p. 72). For Balibar, the equation of class struggle and civil war "ends up displacing the paradoxes of the 'end of politics' and intensifying them" because "civil war, in its ancient and modern conceptions, is *an 'impolitic' notion par excellence*, which brings out its limit or conditions of impossibility at the very heart of politics [emphasis original] (Balibar, 2017, pp. 163–164). For politics to be defined in the most basic sense by irreconcilable antagonism which can only end "in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large" or else "in the common ruin of the contending classes" (Marx & Engels, 2019, p. 62) would suggest that the political space is not shared but rather always liable to be "dissolved as such, ceding to completely external incompatible terms" (Balibar, 2017, p. 164).

However, the conceptualization of the civil war underpinning society and shaping history that we find the *Manifesto* will not be Marx's only conceptualization of civil war. In fact, Balibar goes on to investigate the way in which Marx, in his narration of the fight for limiting working hours in England in *Capital Volume 1* (2024), can be seen to completely reverse the implications and tendencies of this irreconcilable conflict, while still retaining the attachment to a model of

politics as a battle within society. This is apparent when Marx credits the enactment of legislation creating the "normal working day…as the product of a protracted, more or less hidden civil war between members of the capitalist class and members of the working class" (p. 269). Here, the civil war, far from leading to a final victory for the proletariat and an end to politics, is better conceived of as a balance of forces that, rather than rupturing society, leads to reforms that, at least temporarily, redound to the side more able to cohere and pressure the other.

Balibar recommends an investigation of the essential Marxist thesis "that there is no politics without antagonism" in other thinkers of politics, even suggesting an opening "to explore the effects of a reversibility of politics and war *regardless* [emphasis original] of the position of [those thinkers] on Marxism, at the very moment when they inherit fundamental questions from it" (Balibar, 2017, p. 166). An inheritance, Balibar asserts, that "extends to Foucault" referencing Foucault's 1975-1976 *Society Must Be Defended* lectures at the Collège de France and his "famous formulations on the need to invert Clausewitz's formula and posit that politics is a 'continuation of war by other means' (Balibar, 2017, p. 166). Foucault himself, in a 1977 interview, would say that while "certain political discourses", an obvious reference to Marxism, "use the language of a relation of forces" and "struggle", the question remained of "whether these 'struggles' are, or are not, to be analysed as episodes in a war, whether the grid for deciphering them should be that of strategy and tactics" (Foucault, Barou, et al., 1981, p. 164)? However, Foucault's engagement with the model of politics as civil war does not begin with the 1976 *Society Must Be Defended* lectures but rather at least five years earlier in a decisive moment that will guide his work for much the decade. Building on Balibar's recommendation and using his reading of Marx described above as a framework for my own reading of Foucault, in what follows it will be argued that throughout the majority of the 1970s Foucault grapples

with the thinking of politics as civil war, initially both accepting and extending Marx's thesis of politics as a fundamental struggle between opposing forces, before developing a much more ambiguous assessment after completing a genealogy of the concept.

Foucault's Civil War

In 1971, in the now-famous essay *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, Michel Foucault (2019) defined his genealogical task as the investigation of the "singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality", proposing not a "search for 'origins'" but an effort to discover a "secret" behind historical forms and events: that secret being that "they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms" (pp. 139-140, 142). For Foucault, Nietzsche, as genealogist, was able to "recognize the events of history" not as a rectilinear progression towards a more perfect and understanding society or as the necessary unfolding of a dialectical logic but as a series of "surprises", "unsteady victories", and "unpalatable defeats" (p. 142). Foucault was intrigued by the premise of a history "always produced through a particular stage of forces" and the "struggle these forces wage against each other or against adverse circumstances" (pp. 148-149). This history would be one where "the desire for peace, the serenity of compromise, and the tacit acceptance of the law" would not be the result of "a moral conversion or a utilitarian calculation" but the effect of "repeated scenes of violence", both overt and concealed (p. 151). Foucault sets out to analyze history, and particularly the emergence of new forms of power, through the model of a struggle between forces. The question remains though, can this analysis be extended to the field of politics as well?

In a letter to Daniel Defert in December 1972, Foucault wrote that he would be beginning an "analysis of power relations on the basis of 'the most condemned form of war: not Hobbes, not Clausewitz, not the class struggle, but civil war'" (Defert, 2013, p. 52). Foucault would begin his first lecture of the 1972-1973 *The Punitive Society* lectures with a sketching of penal tactics that he proposed to use to analyze power relations, the "central element" of which would be "the political struggle around and against power" (Foucault, 2015, p. 12). In order to understand this political struggle, Foucault would first introduce the "notion of civil war" which he aimed to "put at the heart of all these analyses of penality" (Foucault, 2015, p. 13). Foucault claimed that civil war was an underdeveloped notion for many reasons, one of which being that the "disavowal of civil war, the assertion that civil war does not exist, is one of the first axioms of the exercise of power" (Foucault, 2015, p. 13). This claim by Foucault, that his analysis will reveal the reality of the civil war underpinning society and that the denial of the ongoing waging of this civil war is both an effect of power and a kind of necessary lie of power, immediately calls to mind the language and polemical intent of the *Manifesto* analyzed by Etienne Balibar above, particularly Marx and Engels assertion of "an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight" between classes (Marx & Engels, 2019, p. 62). While not directly engaging with Marx here, Foucault will challenge two other philosophers of politics and conflict. Foucault has in his sights the work of both Hobbes and Rousseau, for whom he claims civil war cannot be the foundation of politics because it is constructed as a purely negative concept against which society defines itself. He specifically rejects both Hobbes's vision of civil war as a "war of all against all" which is sharply differentiated from the peace made via the social contract, and Rousseau's vision of civil war as something which always comes from the outside, which can't have a real basis in society (2015, p. 13). "In either case", Foucault says, "civil war is the accident, the abnormality, and that which

has to be avoided precisely to the extent that it is the theoretical-practical monstrosity" (p. 13). Hobbes and Rousseau must reject the idea that civil war has anything to do with society if society is to be a place of contract and rights that free individuals enter into. Against this, Foucault wants to use a notion of civil war as the "the matrix of all struggles of power, of all strategies of power, and...of all the struggles regarding and against power" (Foucault, 2015, p. 13). For Foucault, the civil war continues within society because the ongoing civil war is what defines society.

In his second lecture that year, Foucault continues his analysis. Again echoing Marx, he notes that, from a reading of the discourse surrounding early nineteenth century French penal laws, "one thing is clear: we are in the midst of social war, which is not the war of all against all, but the war of rich against poor, of owners against those who have nothing, of bosses against proletarians" (Foucault, 2015, p. 22). This is clear to the legislators themselves and to the proletarians against whom the law is wielded. He again mentions Hobbes, not only to reject his notion of "the war of all against all", but specifically to take Hobbes to task for being the one to conflate this ongoing social war with the state of conflict between every individual in the absence of sovereign power (Foucault, 2015, p. 25). It is this elision in discourse, Foucault says, which in part allows for the marking out of the criminal as the individual enemy of society in the eighteenth-century who must be excluded and punished for the sake of that society. Foucault notes this marking is "in reality an instrument by which the class in power transfers to society, in the form of the jury, or to social consciousness" the injunction to punish, though facially neutral it is clear that it is "what the class in power wants to be brought about by those to whom it has apparently transferred the function of judging or punishing" (Foucault, 2015, p. 36).

For Foucault, the problem with Hobbes account is precisely a civil war imagined as a clash of individuals. Hobbes's war of all against all, while not a "historical universality" in the sense of a "stage through which all of humanity would have passed", as Foucault notes it is commonly mischaracterized as, but rather a "spatially limited and historically determinate" description of a way of living, is premised on the idea that these individual subject share a basic equality (Foucault, 2015, p. 25). Between these individuals exists the "permanent possibility" of conflict due to this equality, as well as underlying distrust and a characteristic striving for respect and "glory" (Foucault, 2015, p. 26). This possibility is not countered by a tendency or capability to group together as the tension brought on by "glory, distrust, and competition" cuts across groups as well as families (Foucault, 2015, p. 27). This war of all against all can only be tamed by the emergence of a sovereign power in "which the powers of all the individuals are transferred to" a single actor and can only flare up again "at the end of the day when the sovereign disappears" (Foucault, 2015, pp. 27–28). Society can rest easy because the war has ended, and disputes can now be resolved through peaceful means.

Against Hobbes's concept of a civil war of individuals, Foucault offers his own. Foucault does not believe that civil war has a basis in "an essential virtuality of relationships between individuals (Foucault, 2015, p. 28). From the beginning, civil war is a "confrontation between collective elements", whether "ethnic groups", "religions, families, or "classes" (Foucault, 2015, p. 28). But not only is Foucault's notion of civil war one based on a collective struggle, it also has the effect of composing the very collectivities who carry out that struggle. Civil war is defined as a process for the creation of singularities in so far as it is "the process through which and by which a number of new, previously unknown collective elements are formed" (Foucault, 2015, p. 28). Foucault gives as an example the European peasantry of the "end of Middle Ages"

formed by “popular uprisings” from the “fifteenth century until the middle of the eighteenth century” and the “market riots” and “political insurrections” that “gave cohesion to, and revealed as a unitary and collective force” the *sans-culottes* in the years before the French Revolution of 1789 (Foucault, 2015, p. 28). Importantly, for Foucault, the effect of this civil war is not to eliminate the exercise of power completely but rather to “conquer power, to confiscate or transform it” or else “reactivate” a form of power, as in the bread riots of eighteenth century England, which were not a “confused and violent” chaos but instead an instance of rioters invoking “old regulations of the sixteenth century” to purchase grain at a guaranteed lower price (Foucault, 2015, p. 29). Foucault concludes his elaboration of the notion of civil war by emphasizing that civil war “haunts” all “established power” because civil war “occupies, traverses, animates, and invests” that very established power (Foucault, 2015, p. 31). Contrary to the vision of established power abolishing the constant state of civil war, the civil war in society always exists “in the form of all the instruments of coercion that actually established power acquires in order to wage it” (Foucault, 2015, p. 32).

Though Foucault’s notion of civil war has much in common with Marx’s class struggle, there are important differences in how power is conceived. Foucault admits that the contention that there exists a dominant class that ‘has’ or possesses power may have “political value” but ultimately fails to comprehend power and politics at the level of “historical analysis” (2015, p. 228). Instead, Foucault insists “at the heart of power is a warlike relation” featuring an unstable, and therefore always mobile, front (p. 228). “Power…should be understood as a certain way of conducting civil war” (p. 229). However, this is not a civil war that can be ended or transformed solely by the “control” or “destruction of the State apparatus” as in some conceptions of Marxism and certainly in the language of the *Manifesto* (p. 229). Additionally, this exercise of

power in pursuit of civil war cannot be understood "solely as a guarantee of a mode of production" because it is actually "one of the constitutive elements of the mode of production and functions at its heart" (p. 231). The civil war is not waged to preserve a classes control over capital and the state, capital and the state are made and pushed forward by the ongoing fighting of this war. Foucault closes the lecture on January 10th, 1973 by claiming that if "external war is the continuation of politics, we must say, reciprocally, that politics is the continuation of civil war", a reference to Clausewitz (Foucault, 2015, p. 32).

We've seen how Foucault's notion of politics as civil war both echoes and challenges Marx's own. But beyond Marx, Foucault's theorizing of the relation between war and politics was also in dialogue with political movements emerging out of the experience of May 1968. According to Daniel Defert, as relayed to the editor Bernard Harcourt, Clausewitz's maxim was often invoked by Maoist militants whom Foucault was in contact at the time of the lectures (Foucault, 2015, p. 303). In the coming years, while often returning to this maxim (we can find it repeated in *Discipline and Punish*, the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, *Society Must be Defended* Lectures, as well as a number of interviews) Foucault's conception of the civil war that it references will shift in surprising ways.

History of an Antagonism

In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault makes much use of the model of power and politics as war, proposing to study the now famous "micro-physics of power" which is not to be conceptualized as "property" but rather as "strategy" (p. 26). Invoking the language of military science with its focus on "manoeuvres, tactics, techniques" and "functionings", Foucault envisions a "perpetual battle" where power is not a possession of a "dominant class" but an

"effect" of "strategic positions" (p. 26). Later, in the conclusion to the chapter on the model of discipline in the army, Foucault (1977) says:

> It may be that war as strategy is a continuation of politics. But it must not be forgotten that 'politics' has been conceived as a continuation, if not exactly and directly of war, at least of the military model as a fundamental means of preventing civil disorder. Politics, as a technique of internal peace and order, sought to implement the mechanism of the perfect army, of the disciplined mass, of the docile, useful troop, of the regiment in camp and in the field, on manoeuvres and on exercises. In the great eighteenth-century states, the army guaranteed civil peace no doubt because it was a real force, an ever-threatening sword, but also because it was a technique and a body of knowledge that could project their schema over the social body. If there is a politics-war series that passes through strategy, there is an army-politics series that passes through tactics. It is strategy that makes it possible to understand warfare as a way of conducting politics between states; it is tactics that makes it possible to understand the army as a principle for maintaining the absence of warfare in civil society. The classical age saw the birth of the great political and military strategy by which nations confronted each other's economic and demographic forces; but it also saw the birth of meticulous military and political tactics by which the control of bodies and individual forces was exercised within states. The…military institution, military science…was specified, during this period, at the point of junction between war and the noise of battle on the one hand, and order and silence, subservient to peace, on the other. (p. 168)

While this conception of politics as civil war makes use of familiar language, the civil war invoked here is decidedly one-sided. Gone are the generative effects of this war on the collectivities that wage it. In their place is a permanent practice of pacification, the possibility of suppressing the war that constitutes society through the very same techniques that make eighteenth century warfare possible. Foucault finished *Discipline and Punish* and began work on the first volume of *History of Sexuality* on August 26th, 1974 (Elden, 2017b, p. 1). In a letter to Daniel Defert around that time, he explained that his work on discipline and penality had become "familiar and repetitive" and expressed the desire to "work on other things: political economy, strategy" and "politics"(Defert, 2013, p. 56). The result will be a settling of accounts of sorts with the notion of civil war and its underlying theory of repression that he developed in the 1973 *The Punitive Society* lectures. Foucault achieved this through a kind of self-critique, through a genealogy of a concept he had been making significant use of. In a significant shift, Foucault investigates the history of the social war and questions its use as the basis of his political thinking.

In the first lecture of 1975-1976 *Society Must Be Defended* lectures, Foucault reflects on the last several years of his research and seems dismayed that it "never added up to a coherent body of work" while "always falling into the same rut, the same themes", and "the same concepts" (Foucault, 2003, p. 3). He suggests that due to "changes in the conjuncture", a reappraisal of the work of previous years was necessary (Foucault, 2003, p. 11). It was certain that Foucault wanted to move away from any conception of power and politics functioning according to the model of the economy wherein power and rights are contractually granted or withdrawn. Against this, he asks whether power relations in society can be understood as being "anchored in a certain relationship of force that was established in and through war at a given

historical moment that can be historically specified" (Foucault, 2003, p. 15). In this sense even when a society appears to be at peace, "political struggles" are to be "interpreted as a continuation of war" with the goal of "repression" of the dominated (2003, p. 16). Foucault questioned whether this model implied a possibility of a final confrontation that would bring about "an end to politics" and an end to "the exercise of power as continuous warfare", a formulation very close to Marx's conception of the end of the political state (2003, p. 16). It's clear that Foucault wanted to avoid any conception of politics that imagined a definite end to political struggle, not least of which because it would pose a theoretical problem for his understanding of power. For Foucault, power was not conceived of as a force that limited or suppressed the inherent character of a political subject. Consequently, power could not be 'overthrown' in a grand gesture, especially not as a result of some last encounter between opposing political forces, that would free the capability of a pre-existing subject and inaugurate an unalienated existence. For these reasons, Foucault (2003) admitted to a profound doubt in the usefulness of thinking politics through the model of civil war, saying:

> It is obvious that everything I have said to you in previous years is inscribed within the struggle-repression schema. That is indeed the schema I was trying to apply. Now, as I tried to apply it, I was eventually forced to reconsider it; both because, in many respects, it is still insufficiently elaborated—I would even go so far as to say that it is not elaborated at all—and also because I think that the twin notions of "repression" and "war" have to be considerably modified and ultimately, perhaps, abandoned. At all events, we have to look very closely at these two notions of "repression" and "war"; if you like, we have to look a little more closely at the hypothesis that the mechanisms of power are essentially

> mechanisms of repression, and at the alternative hypothesis that what is rumbling away and what is at work beneath political power is essentially and above all a warlike relation. (p. 17)

Foucault was seeking to understand a historical paradox: at the very time that European states established a monopoly on violence and "expelled" actual warfare to the "limits of the State" or "confined it to the frontier", a new "historico-political discourse on society" emerged that said that war was "the ineradicable basis of all relations and institutions of power" (p. 49). This discourse was not that of the political philosophers, Hobbes and Rousseau, whom Foucault had critiqued before, but was instead a discourse mobilized by political factions and classes in seventeenth and eighteen century England and France. This discourse did not adopt the ostensibly neutral position of the sovereigns advocate but explicitly took a side in this war, much the same as Foucault had in the years prior to this course. It was a discourse that aimed to have a real effect in this ongoing war, and therefore an effect in society, to remind one side of a binary division in society that a war was still happening beneath all the outward signs of peace and comity, and it drew its authority precisely because the speaker of the discourse was not impartial but because they were a committed partisan (p. 52). This discourse said that "truth" was a "force" which could "be deployed only on the basis of a relationship of force" (p. 53). Finally, the war in society that this discourse referred to was specifically conceived of as a war between races, though not as Foucault emphasizes, race in the "historico-biological sense" found in nineteenth-century racism (though it would later be undergo a "transcription" into that form) but rather marking a "certain historico-political divide"

between “two groups which do not, at least to begin with, have the same language or, in many cases, the same religion (pp. 60, 77).

Foucault again invokes the name of Hobbes, not to argue that he is a founder or inheritor of this discourse but rather that he is its enemy. Returning to Hobbes’s war of all against all between equivalent individuals, Foucault inverts his previous interpretation to portray a Hobbes who is not a theorist of war at all. Instead of an ongoing battle that is finally put to an end by sovereign power, Hobbes’s war is a war of signaling. It’s participants always appearing as if they are eager for combat so as to intimidate one another and forever postpone the actual clash. For the Foucault of *Society Must Be Defended*, Hobbes’s civil war is one that never arrives. But what is the consequence of this shift on the state, which is created in order to end this war, if it never actually takes place? It is no longer constituted to end the war in society by force but instead accepted by all, in a sense, after (or even before) a real fight is waged. Foucault claimed that Hobbes’s curious erasure of war at the level of discourse is directed specifically at the new historico-political discourse of war, specifically because this discourse stresses the concept, both theoretically and historically, of “the Conquest” (p. 98).

The theoretical and historical event of ‘the Conquest’ was the anchoring concept of this problematic of ongoing civil war. In the discourse of the English Civil War, the dominant power of the English monarchy, the power of the parliament, and the radical power of the Levellers and the Diggers all made reference to the history of the Norman defeat of the Anglo-Saxons and the Conquest of England. But it was specifically this third radical power which most clearly invoked the historico-political discourse that Foucault is investigating. To thinkers associated with the Levellers “the government, the

laws, and property statutes" were understood to be the "continuation of the war, the invasion, and the defeat" inaugurated by the Norman Conquest of England (p. 108). Some, in the more radical Digger movement, even took this line of thinking to its logical conclusion to argue that "any form of power leads to domination…that there are no historical forms of power…that cannot be analyzed in terms of the dominion of some over others." For Foucault, this is the first time one can find an exhortation to analyze all power "in terms of the unending movement – which has no historical end – of the shifting relations that make some dominant over others (p. 109). A position incredibly close to the one that Foucault himself adopted in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History* (2019) and at the same time a position that necessarily rejected that an end to politics was possible or even desirable.

Foucault then uses his genealogy to implicitly critique a certain Marxist conception of civil war that is intertwined with a dialectical philosophy of history. He does this through following the rise of this discourse on the war of races in seventeenth-century France. While in the English context Foucault sees the site of the emergence of this discourse in the radical factions of the Civil War, in France, he finds this discourse first emerging among the reactionary feudal nobles opposed to the absolutist monarchy. It is a discourse that aims to intervene in a contemporary conjuncture through arguments over the history and consequences of the relations between the Romans, the Gauls, and the invading Franks. It is not long, however, before the forces of the monarchy and, later, the rising urban bourgeoisie enter this discursive field and soon co-opt it to their own political ends. The mobility and convertibility of this discourse across a scene of politically opposed factions is possible because, for Foucault, this discourse should not be thought according to the model of ideology, whereby an array of concepts is produced by a

certain class for use in the domination of others, but rather as a "tactical instrument" which is "transferable" and eventually "generalized" in so far as it itself forms a field of political contestation (pp. 189-190). This discovery will have profound effects on Foucault's method. From this point forward, Foucault will move away from the use of the notion of civil war as politics, while remaining committed at the level of analysis to using the model of war to understand discourse.

The precise way that the bourgeoise intervenes in this discourse fundamentally changes its conceptual field and therefore its usefulness for Foucault. The bourgeoisie is able to take up and use the discourse on a war between races and transform it into one of a war between classes through the introduction of a key discursive strategy: the "self-dialectization of historical discourse". This discursive strategy, Foucault argues, solves two problems for the French bourgeoise which allows them to justify their claim to the position of ruling class. First, it makes up for a lack of an ability to identify itself as a "historical subject within the play of relations of force" in the context of the historical debates over the Franks, Gauls, and Romans. Second, it allows for the conceiving of a social struggle in "purely civilian terms", a struggle at the level of the economy or parliamentary politics (p. 208, 225). It therefore has the consequence of reducing the role of war in politics from one of a permanent and necessary constitutive conflict to a possible but always temporary moment in an inevitable "reconciliation" of society (p. 216). For the thinkers of bourgeois historico-political discourse, the bourgeoisie was a class which was formed as a particular element in society, which gradually came into possession of the economic and administrative forces of that society, and which now

could make a claim on control of the State and bring to an end the warlike political relation in society.

At the end of his investigation, Foucault's previous theoretical and political positions are fundamentally altered. The problem for Foucault that this genealogy presents is twofold: whether a war or a relation of forces can continue to serve as an analyzer of history and society even if the model of politics as civil war is abandoned and whether a political-economic conception of politics, without a foundation in war, is possible absent a philosophy of history of a dialectical type? Foucault has discovered a discourse of ongoing conquest and occluded civil war, of a racial, ethnic, or national character, that persists within and underneath society. What shocks Foucault is how similar this discourse resembles his own previous theorizing of politics as the practice of civil war. In part this is a consequence of Foucault's uptake and extension of Marx's theory of class struggle. Marx's class struggle is a direct descendant of this discourse of civil war and specifically its use by the French Bourgeoise. In a subtle critique of Marx and the assertion by Marx to have introduced the dialectic into history, Foucault claims instead that the bourgeoisie where the first to put forth a dialectical logic. But this dialectic also serves to pacify the discourse of civil war and to present the possibility of a resolution and an 'end to politics'. Foucault rejects this dialectic and the concept of an 'end to politics' entirely. But rather than reviving a pre-dialectical form of this discourse, Foucault begins to move away from the conception of politics as antagonism and war entirely. In part this is due to the close link between war and the understanding of power as a repressive force, which directly clashes with Foucault's conception of power as productive of subjects and relations.

Towards a Politics as Thought

In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, we can read an explicit shift away from understanding politics solely as a relation of war within society. In the chapter on method, Foucault (1985) asks:

> Should we turn the expression around, then, and say that politics is war pursued by other means? If we still wish to maintain a separation between war and politics, perhaps we should postulate that this multiplicity of force relations can be coded — in part but never totally— either in the form of ‘war,' or in the form of 'politics'; this would imply two different strategies (but the one always liable to switch into the other) for integrating these unbalanced, heterogeneous, unstable, and tense force relations. (p. 93)

Written before, during, and published slightly after the *Society Must Be Defended* lectures, the implications of his genealogical work are beginning to make themselves clear. While Foucault continues to advocate for analyzing power through the model of war, he concedes that this is not the only way in which power can or even should be thought. Reintroducing the possibility of a separation between war and politics, even if conceived, as it is here, as a discursive strategy, will allow Foucault to later elaborate a concept of governmentality in which a thinking of political struggle recedes from his focus. It’s clear that after an extended period of engagement with the notion of politics as civil war, Foucault has begun to reject an explicitly antagonistic conception of politics.

After the 1976 course and publication of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault will take a year-long sabbatical which will mark the end of any further elaboration of

the problematic of civil war in his published work. When asked, in an interview with Bernard-Henry Lévy in March of 1977, whether his thesis that power should be analyzed not as repression but instead as a productive force was a "new idea", Foucault (1996) took the opportunity to frame his project in a different light:

> If I wanted to pose and drape myself in a slightly fictive coherence, I would tell you that this has always been my problem: effects of power and the production of "truth." I have always felt ill at ease with this ideological notion which has been used so much in recent years. It has been used to explain errors or illusions, shaded representations—in short, everything that impedes the formation of true discourses. It has also been used to show the relationship between what goes on in peoples' heads and their place in the relations of production. In all, the economy of untruth. My problem is the politics of truth. I have taken a lot of time in realizing it. (p. 220)

This focus on the "discourse of truth" and the ways in which power both "demands truth and needs it in order to function" was foreshadowed in the *Society Must Be Defended* lectures and would guide Foucault's work in the final years of his life (Foucault, 2003, p. 24). In a discussion in July later that year, Foucault is asked directly, given the model of politics as struggle, whether it is possible to avoid "the question of the subject" (Foucault, Grosrichard, et al., 1981, p. 207). Foucault initially responds with a critique of the deliberate vagueness of certain Marxist conceptions of struggle (leaving aside Marx himself and "perhaps Trotsky") (p. 208). An interlocutor responds with the assertion that, at the very least, Marxists do set out to make a distinction between friends and enemies in the struggle and therefore implicitly grapple with the subject of politics. Foucault in a surprising invocation of Hobbes, ventures the idea that the subject of political struggle is in a sense "all against all" (p. 208). However, what initially

seems to be a repudiation of his previous critiques of Hobbes's 'war of all against all' is instead an example of Foucault taking Hobbes's concept of a struggle of individuals to its limit. Foucault wonders whether there is some subjectivity "within each of us" that fights "something else" beneath the level of the individual (p. 208). Foucault is suggesting here a concept of the self as a subjectivity that is divided and unstable. While strategically positioned as no more than a "hypothesis", Foucault's beginning gesture towards a theory of the subject, and a questioning of the coherence of the self, points the way toward the topic of the next chapter of this thesis where we will ask whether Foucault's later work on truth and political spirituality offer a way of thinking politics without civil war. We will also examine the work of a theorist, Sylvain Lazarus, who rejects both a concept of politics based in a pre-existing antagonism as well as it's complementary philosophy of history.

2 Singular Thought

Michel Foucault's critique of the model of politics as civil war is followed by his famous lectures on governmentality and biopower (Foucault, 2010b). Here the focus is on practices of governing subjects and managing population that have their roots in the "Christian pastorate", the church whose responsibility is to guide the community of souls (Foucault, 2007). It was in part this archival work, as well as theoretical problems in his original conception of *The History of Sexuality* which are beyond the scope of this thesis, that would redirect Foucault's focus to the early Christian church and the distinction between the body and the flesh as it pertained to morality and sexual practice (Elden, 2017b). This initial research prompted Foucault to begin a search beyond early Christianity to ancient Greece for pre-Christian conceptions of the relation between truth, ethics, and the subject that he would present in his final lectures and the last three volumes of *The History of Sexuality*.

There are some who interpret Foucault's late turn towards concerns with ethics and truth in early Christianity and Greek antiquity as a turn away from engagement with and theorization of politics. They see Foucault rejecting the desirability of revolutionary politics for a renewed focus on the self. This chapter argues instead that Foucault's work on spirituality and the subject is eminently political in the emancipatory and positive sense. In what follows, we will first introduce Sylvain Lazarus's 'anthropology' of politics and his method for investigating singularity. Then, we will explore Lazarus's critique of Foucault's method and conception of singularity in *The Order of Things*. To do this we will make use of an exchange that Lazarus references between Foucault and a group known as the Cercle d'Épistémologie, who asked several probing questions about Foucault's archaeological method. Finally, we will read Foucault's work on the concept of 'spirituality' as offering a response to Lazarus's critique and,

through a reading of Foucault's reporting from Iran, a concept of politics founded on transformation and rupture.

The Political Anthropologist

Sylvain Lazarus is a political theorist, or in his own words, a political "anthropologist" (Lazarus, 2015, p. xviii). He chose this designation in order to place himself in "a disciplinary horizon that is potentially capable of welcoming, accepting and grasping the subjective" because his project is above all an "inquiry into what people think" (Lazarus, 2015, p. xviii). Lazarus distinguishes his anthropology from how other "scientistic or positivist" disciplines approach the "question of thought" via "its relationship to the real (to objective reality), that is to say, in a relation between a subjective (which is always regarded with suspicion) and an objective (which is always certain)" (Lazarus, 2015, pp. xviii-xix). Before considering himself an anthropologist, however, Lazarus was an activist who, along with Natacha Michel and Alain Badiou, founded a "post-Leninist organization called 'Organization politique'" around the idea of "a politics in interiority" (Lazarus, 2015, p. xviii). For Lazarus a 'politics in interiority', is an answer to the problems of a politics oriented around or in reference to a pre-existing object, whether classes, a party, the state, or revolution. This form of politics constitutes a "politics in exteriority" because it begins from the position of a pre-existing notion, and therefore outside the subjective thought of people. For Lazarus, a politics in exteriority should be avoided both because it is always liable to fall within the remit of the state and because it blinds one to singular political movements which don't arrange themselves according to an external schema.

Lazarus's anthropology is founded on two axioms: "People think" and "thought is a relation of the real" (Lazarus, 2015, p. ix). By 'People think', he means that people, the subject

of politics, are the source of singular thought in politics. People think is also what Lazarus refers to as a "problematic decision", because it is not the end of a theory but a "protocol of inquiry", and invitation to "[proceed] by way of inquiry at all times" (pp. x-xi). People for Lazarus is a category that he calls a "certain indistinct", certain because they exist, but indistinct because "nothing is prejudged" about them by the anthropologist before beginning a political inquiry (Lazarus, 2015, p. x). Lazarus uses the phrase 'thought is a relation of the real' instead of the more commonly invoked 'relation to the real' because he means that a thought about the possibilities available in a certain situation is a subjective thought that always remains subjective rather than a thought that exists in relation to an external objective fact. For Lazarus, it is precisely because thought is not understood in reference to or as expression of an external object or process, whether the state, social relations, or historical forces, that allows for the entrance into political thought of singularity. Lazarus is committed to leaving open the possibility of singular political situations arising, which necessitates a rejection of the generalizing tendencies of political theory. The "problematic of singularity" is also maintained by "the characterization of politics as *sequential* [emphasis original], that is to say, as non-permanent and rare, within… a *historical mode of politics* [emphasis original]" (Lazarus, 2015, p. 4). Politics is able to remain a space of singular invention because it is not a persistent state of affairs and because each singular political sequence is non-repeatable. Importantly for Lazarus, a mode of politics may 'end' but it never 'fails'. This is because politics is not conceived of as a process with a goal to be achieved, which would allow us to look back on a political movement with the benefit of hindsight and judge its participants on that basis. Rather, the success of politics is always and precisely the fact that, for a time, a group of people cohered and thought something new about the world that had not existed before.

A historical mode of politics is not a way to define the essence of politics, beyond a singular thought, but rather a way to group together certain "sites" where politics happened (p. xiv). These sites are not the physical location of politics but are instead the organizations or experiences whose existence comprised a certain political sequence. For example, the French Revolutionary mode of politics includes sites like the "Jacobin Convention" and the "sans-culottes" (Lazarus, 2015, p. xiv). A historical mode of politics denotes a certain way of thinking politics subjectively within a sequence but importantly does not exist in relation to a theory of the development of history, for example that of Marx's whereby the "material conditions of existence" exert a force that "determine[s] forms of consciousness" (p. 78). Politics cannot be derived from historical development, which we could understand through history or sociology, if we wish to remain open to the possibility of the emergence of a political singularity. The reason for this is because, for Lazarus, history necessarily creates causal links between conditions in the past and politics in the present. Once these links are established, the status of singularity in politics is uncertain, as historical continuity overwhelms the disjuncture that it requires. "I am a thinker of singularity and the name of Michel Foucault is not foreign to me" announces Lazarus in the preface to the English edition of the *Anthropology of the Name* (2015, p. xvii). Indeed, the key to understanding the differences between Lazarus and Foucault on politics, thought, and politics as thought is through their shared commitment to singularity. We will approach this through Lazarus's reading of Foucault's *The Order of Things*, which will bring into stark relief their differing conceptions of singularity.

The Order of Things and The Cercle d'Épistémologie

In *The Order of Things* (2006b), Foucault examined the organization of different forms of knowledge across three periods: the Renaissance, from the fifteenth century to the middle of the

seventeenth century; the Classical period, from the middle of the seventeenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century; and the modern age, from the nineteenth century to the present. Utilizing an 'archaeological' method, Foucault reconstructs three distinct "epistemological fields" or "epistemes", the underlying order of which makes knowledge acceptable. Each of these epistemes is both radically singular, without reiteration, and occurs in a sequence, with a beginning and end (p. xxiii). The Renaissance, Foucault argues, was defined by the principle of resemblance, the Classical by the principle of representation, and the modern by an anthropological form of knowledge unified by the concept of the human. Rejecting a model of knowledge as a progressive process towards greater understanding and objectivity, Foucault instead wanted to understand how knowledge, specifically the knowledge of "living beings, languages, and economic facts", were each constructed in radically different forms across these three periods, while within a given period these three apparently disparate domains all shared a certain grounding or basic order (p. ix).

It is for this archeological work that Lazarus (2015) will refer to Michel Foucault as "the first theoretician of singularities" and commend him for "having isolated irreducible singularities with his notion of episteme" (p. 87). However, Lazarus suggests, a problem arises when Foucault's "identification of irreducible epistemes", the discovery of a unique forms of knowledge confined to a period that isn't assignable to a more general category or explained as an expression of some other causative agent, is then followed by his "demonstrating the existence of their multiplicity" (p. 88). The problem is whether Foucault, in uncovering multiple singularities, can maintain their irreducibility and singularity or whether he must resort to a general theory to explain their relation to each other and to himself as their thinker. In his footnotes, Lazarus cites an exchange between Foucault and an organization referred to as the

Cercle d'Épistémologie, an exchange which will need further explication if we are to understand the difficulty of thinking singularity.

The Cercle d'Épistémologie, as previously mentioned, was the name for the group of students and former students of Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser, mostly from the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, who collectively published the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, a journal concerned with the investigation of the theoretical innovations of the 'structuralist' moment of the late 1960s (Hallward, 2012). Knox Peden contextualizes the Cercle's interest in Foucault's work as arising from a "desire to see if it was possible to maintain a discourse in which the reciprocity between the conditioning and the conditioned could be thought without an appeal to some ground or instance extrinsic to the relation" (Peden, 2012, p. 74). This is a desire that Foucault shared in so far as *The Order of Things* contained a critique the figure of man as the "empirico-transcendental doublet" as both the subject and condition of knowledge (2006b, p. 347).

In the ninth volume of the *Cahiers*, several members of the Cercle, including Alain Badiou, put a series of questions to Foucault on the methodological approach he employed in *The Order of Things*. The Cercle was interested in many aspects of Foucault's method but as we are focusing on his relation to Lazarus, we will limit our reading to two important areas of questioning. The first concerns the status of the author and "how he would define the point [of leverage] from which he might raise the epistemic earth?" (Le Cercle d'Épistémologie, 2012, p. 154). Here the Cercle is referencing the stirrings of a change in episteme that Foucault claims to detect when he remarks that "man" as an "invention of recent date" is "perhaps nearing its end". The Cercle (2012) goes on to elaborate their question in more detail, asking:

> if one were to call an author's historicity his belonging to the episteme of his epoch and 'finitude' the name that an epoch – notably our own – might give to its own limits, what relations or non-relations…might be obtained between this relation and this finitude? Would he be willing to consider an alternative between a radical historicism (whereby archaeology would be able to predict its own reinscription into a new discourse) and a sort of absolute knowledge (of which some authors might have had a presentiment, independently of epistemic constraints)? (p. 154)

The Cercle is asking Foucault, as a thinker, to place himself in relation to the multiple epistemes he has discovered. As Peden writes, Foucault intended to "establish the historicity of epistemes, and to show that epistemes by and large determine the horizons of intellectual activity for an epoch" (2012, p. 73). But the question raised is whether or not Foucault, as a practitioner of intellectual activity within the modern episteme, would be bound by this same horizon. Is Foucault able to think outside of his own episteme through recourse to a method or is the discovery of the historical existence of epistemes another element of the epistemic structure whose organizing principle is man and his finitude? This is a key problem for Lazarus. As he writes, the discovery of the "existence of singularities does not resolve the problem of the thought that enables their investigation" (2015, p. 88). Lazarus will claim that Foucault "stopped at the threshold of the question of interiority" and we can read in fact that Foucault will not respond conclusively to this line of questioning (2015, p. 87).

In his answer to the Cercle's question, Foucault will acknowledge that, given that he was "investigating that strange and quite problematic configuration of human sciences to which my own discourse [was] tied", he would inevitably "risk raising…the question of knowing whence it

can arise, for everything I say could well have the effect of displacing the place from which I am saying it" (Foucault, 1998, p. 311). He suggested, therefore that though he "believed [him]self to have been speaking from the same place as those discourses, [he] must now acknowledge that" he was instead speaking "from that difference, that infinitesimal discontinuity which my discourse already left in its wake" (Foucault, 1998, p. 311). However, Foucault's suggestion that he was in fact speaking from an approaching episteme does not solve the theoretical problem but merely displaces the place of the discovery of the historicity and multiplicity of epistemes to this very approaching contemporary episteme. For Lazarus, reading this exchange with the Cercle, it is exactly because Foucault's thought defaults to one in exteriority that he "cannot engage in the analysis of [this] contemporary episteme" (Lazarus, 2015, p. 89). Answering this critique would require a more developed conception of the subject's relation to the episteme and what distinguishes Foucault from the other thinkers that feature in *The Order of Things*.

The Cercle would also ask Foucault about the role of selection in his method, how a unity of knowledges was arrived at and how he "grouped together knowledges in the shape of unitary systems" (Le Cercle d'Épistémologie, 2012, p. 152). In Foucault's (1998) response to the Cercle's first set of questions, he begins with questioning the inherited conceptions of unity in the study of thought, particularly the immediately apparent but ultimately misleading unities of "the work of an author, the cohesion of an epoch, or the evolution of a science" (p. 311). For Foucault, "the unities that must be questioned are those which appear most immediately" (p. 303). Instead of these unities, Foucault sees "an immense domain" of the "set of all effective statements" and proposed that his "project", the analysis of discourse, was one of a "*pure description of the facts of discourse*[emphasis original]" (Foucault, 1998, p. 306). He distinguishes this project from a linguistic analysis which asked "according to what rules" would

a “statement [be] constituted and consequently, according to what rules could other similar statements be constructed?” (Foucault, 1998, p. 307). Foucault’s “description of discourse”, on the other hand, asks “how is it that [a] statement appeared, rather than some other one in its place?” (Foucault, 1998, p. 307). Foucault asserts that discourse is ordered according to a “rule of formation” (p. 320).

The Cercle is ultimately unsatisfied by this answer both because Foucault seems to be able to define the rule “from the outset” (Le Cercle d’Épistémologie, 2012, p. 155) and because, in their words, Foucault claims that:

> the system of a set of statements must be capable of forming solely the statements that are actually produced, and no others in addition, or in their stead. But is it not necessary to reconstitute a system of formation capable of indefinite productivity, before imposing upon it the limitation of only producing the finite number of statements that have taken place? (Le Cercle d’Épistémologie, 2012, pp. 155–156)

It is this exchange in particular which poses a problem for Lazarus. While Foucault attempts to explain the formation of a discourse through reference to a series of ‘rules’, the Cercle wonders how can one define a ‘rule’ in reference to only one instance of a discursive formation? The question has immediate relevance for Lazarus (2015), who asks, “if thought, which makes it possible to think the episteme, is not a general theory, what is its status?” (p. 88). Lazarus sees “the relation of words to things” as the fundamental unifying concept for Foucault investigation of epistemes but Foucault does not explicitly say whether this concept is internal to

a specific episteme or external to all epistemes. Because of this non-placement, Foucault's thinking of epistemes necessarily "becomes the element of a general theory" (2015, p. 88).

Some have seen the course of Foucault's work following his exchange with the Cercle as an implicit acceptance of their critique. In Stuart's (2023) reading, Foucault's shift from the method of archeology in the order of things to a genealogical approach in his lectures of the 1970s and the seminal *Discipline and Punish* is an "abandonment of singularity" (p. 5) and, in effect, a form of "intellectual avoidance" (p. 1). According to this account, when faced with the disarming critiques of his method by the editors of the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse,* Foucault has no intellectual avenue left other than the application of a new methodology based in a continuity rather than discontinuous singularity. Stuart argues that it is precisely the critique of the subject that Foucault is invested in making at the moment of *The Order of Things* that prevents him from formulating an adequate account of singularity because, after all, "a theory of singularity is a theory of subjectivity" (p. 11).

While Foucault's shift to the method of genealogy does indeed set aside the problem of singularity and the status of its thinker for a time, it is in Foucault's late work that an answer to these questions can be identified. Stuart takes his account of the debate between Foucault and the Cercle, in part, from Peden's reconstruction, but it is precisely what Peden closes his essay with that presents us with the beginnings of his response. Peden reads *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (2002), where Foucault elaborates on his archaeological method in detail, as the work where, ironically, the Cercle's critiques "gain their deepest traction" because in his attempts to respond directly to them, "he winds up ultimately affirming their validity" (Peden, 2012, p. 79). However, it is in this affirmation that Foucault also provides an answer to Lazarus, who accuses him of "falling into history" in his approach to analyzing "contemporary and non-contemporary

singularities" (Lazarus, 2015, p. 89). Foucault defined discourse as "a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation" not as "a rhetorical or formal unity, endlessly repeatable, whose appearance or use in history might be indicated (and, if necessary, explained)" (Foucault, 2002, p. 131). Therefore, discourse was not "an ideal, timeless form that also possesses a history" of which we could "ask…how and why it was able to emerge and become embodied at this point in time" (Foucault, 2002, p. 131). Rather, "it [was], from beginning to end, historical – a fragment of history, a unity and discontinuity in history itself, posing the problem of its own limits, its divisions, its transformations, the specific modes of its temporality rather than its sudden irruption in the midst of the complicities of time" (p. 131). Peden sees this as exactly the circular problem that the Cercle sensed. Foucault's commits to a theory of discourse that "refus[es] to appeal to a transcendental invariant" (Peden, 2012, p. 81). However, in attempting to hold to this commitment, "Foucault nevertheless makes history itself an invariant, a fount of permanent change that, as opposed to language for example, serves as discourse's most fundamental condition" (p. 81).

In most historical discourse, Peden argues, the discourse that Lazarus claims cannot help us understand the singularity of politics, the "appeal to history is made to ensure the possibility of change, indeed the manifest reality of change" (Peden, 2012, pp. 81-82). The novelty of Foucault's formulation is that he appeals to the historical only to "[sanction] a multitude of empirical descriptions" (Peden, 2012, pp. 81-82). History here is a background condition rather than a process that implies any sort of causation. It is this apparent paradox of a history without a guarantee of the possibility of change, that resembles the approach of Lazarus, who evacuates history, whether in the form of changing material conditions or even the passage of time itself,

from any determining role in the generation of a singularity. In this sense, we can see that Foucault does not "surrender to history" as Lazarus claims (Lazarus, 2015, p. 89).

But the question remains, Peden argues, of "how conceptual transformations take place in something that is 'from beginning to end, historical'"? (Peden, 2012, p. 82). Peden sees Foucault as beginning to offer an answer to this problem with his concept of the "positivity of a discourse", or the "field in which formal identities, thematic continuities, translations of concepts, and polemical interchanges may be deployed", as the "historical a priori" which "has to take account of the fact that discourse has not only a meaning or a truth, but a history" (Foucault, 2002, pp. 142-143). As we've seen, Foucault severs the link between history and causation. But in formulating the historical a priori, Foucault "separates history not simply from meaning, but from truth as well" and makes "the history of a discourse and the truth of a discourse" into "distinct questions" which "require different kinds of responses" (Peden, 2012, p. 82). Importantly though, this "a priori…does not constitute, above events…an atemporal structure" but "is itself a transformable group" (Foucault, 2002, p. 144). Peden traces Foucault's return to this concept of the transformable in his late work on spirituality and the subject in order to draw a connection between Foucault and Jacques Lacan. For our purposes however, Foucault's elaboration of the transformative subject and its spiritual practices will be the key to distinguishing Lazarus's notion of singularity from Foucault's and the consequences for their respective understandings of politics as thought.

Return of the Subject and Spirituality

Foucault's elaboration of the transformability of concepts, introduced in The Archaeology of Knowledge in 1969, is interrupted by Foucault's genealogical period in the 1970s. However, Peden argues that Foucault returns to the "notion of the transformable" in the original preface to *The History of Sexuality, Volume II* (Peden, 2012, p. 83). This preface, published in 1984, serves as a kind of "schematic" summary of Foucault's project since the 1960s, though, as he notes, "things did not really unfold so neatly, and there were many obscurities and hesitations along the way" (Foucault, 2010a, p. 336). Here Foucault interprets the work from his archeological period as operating via the "principle of the irreducibility of thought", the understanding that "singular forms of experience" can't be determined or structured "except through thought" (Foucault, 2010a, p. 335). The second principle he invokes is that of the "singularity of the history of thought", the commitment to the idea that there are "events of thought" (Foucault, 2010a, p. 335). An event in thought is an irruption that introduces singularity with consequences and resonances that outlast it. Foucault's third principle, with the most resonance for an understanding of the subject, is that of the "modality of the relation to the self" (p. 338) which is that:

> criticism—understood as analysis of the historical conditions which bear on the creation of links to truth, to rules, and to the self—does not mark out impassable boundaries or describe closed systems; it brings to light transformable singularities. These transformations could not take place except by means of a working of thought upon itself. (Foucault, 2010a, p. 335)

Foucault's return to the transformable and his new conception of the subject as self-relation amounts to a delayed response to the Cercle's questions. For Peden, to understand "one's selfhood as transformable requires an antecedent formal thinking of the 'self' as a site of non-identity in which two terms relate, for transformation presupposes relation" (Peden, 2012, p. 84). In a sense, Foucault's answer to the Cercle "presupposes a concept of split subjectivity that makes a cognitive assessment of the relation among forms, not to mention their historical transformation, possible" (Peden, 2012, pp. 79-80). It is this 'split subjectivity', already hinted at in the Foucault's comment that there is some subjectivity "within each of us" that fights "something else" (Foucault, Grosrichard, et al., 1981, p. 208) that the later Foucault offers to Lazarus's (2015) criticism – expressed in the rhetorical question of whether, when faced with the existence of multiple singularities, "the researcher will vary with the singularity and mould her thinking to each one?" (p. 88). While Lazarus (2015) would reject this approach to theorizing singularity based in a transformative subject "precisely because of its abstraction" and its seeming requirement of "a general theory that brings exteriority back into the picture", Foucault will spend a considerable time, in the archives of Christian and Greek antiquity as well as in Iran, in search not of a general theory or method, but of an understanding of the relation between a set of spiritual practices and a conception of a transformative self (p. 88). In fact, he will explicitly counterpose these spiritual practices and their relation to truth with a conception of knowledge as something that results solely from the proper application of a method. Foucault thus presents us with another approach to thinking singularity through the concept of spirituality, because for him, the subject "is not a substance" but "a form, and this form is not primarily or always identical to itself" (Becker et al., 1997, p. 290).

Foucault's first elaboration of the concept of these spiritual practices occurs in the *Hermeneutics of the Subject* lectures (2006a), where he examines the relation between two conceptions in ancient Greek philosophy and everyday discourse, "*Epimeleia heautou*", the "care of the self", and "*gnōthi seauton*", the enjoinder to "know yourself" (p. 3). His contention is that the full meaning and history of the care of the self has been lost to our great detriment. He asks, "in what historical form do the relations between the 'subject' and 'truth'…take shape in the West?" (p. 2). Foucault claims that "Cartesian moment" is where the conception of *gnōthi seauton* is made the basis of a "fundamental means of access to truth" and *epimeleia heautou* is "exclude[ed]…from the field of modern philosophical thought (p. 14).

This has profound implications for both thought and politics. With a theory of thought based on knowledge of the self, "the condition for the subject's access to the truth…is knowledge (connaissance) and knowledge alone" (p. 17). This implies, Foucault says, that one "can recognize the truth and have access to it in himself and solely through his activity of knowing, without anything else being demanded of him and without him having to change or alter his being as subject" (p. 17). As long as one satisfies "internal conditions" including "formal conditions, objective conditions, formal rules of method, the structure of the object to be known" and "extrinsic" or "cultural conditions" including "hav[ing] studied, hav[ing] an education, and operat[ing] within a certain scientific consensus", knowledge is thought to be available and even expected as compensation for fulfilling these conditions. (p. 18). As a result, Foucault argues, access to knowledge is founded on "conditions that are either intrinsic to knowledge or extrinsic to the act of knowledge, but which do not concern the subject in his being; they only concern the individual in his concrete existence, and not the structure of the subject as such" (p. 18).

Foucault's reclaiming of another conception of the relation between thought and the subject of thought marks a departure from the assumptions underpinning Lazarus's political anthropology. As conceptually radical and egalitarian in its concern for the thought of people as the political anthropology of Sylvain Lazarus is, it is premised on exactly the subject of knowledge that Foucault is criticizing. In some sense, Lazarus's theoretical strategy for dealing with this subject of knowledge is to circumscribe the domain in which thought is even possible. For Lazarus, a thought in interiority cannot be accessed from the outside. The political anthropologist, who wishes to study a mode of politics, can never think the same thought of the participants of that mode, only a thought about that thought. This separation is a necessity if a singular thought is to remain singular. For Lazarus, operating with the subject of knowledge that has been given to us from the 'Cartesian moment', this disjunction between singular thought and the thought of the thought must be maintained.

Against this concept of the subject of knowledge, Foucault describes a philosophy based on *epimeleia heautou*, or the care of the self, beginning with the question of "what it is that enables the subject to have access to the truth and which attempts to determine the conditions and limits of the subject's access to the truth" (p. 15). Its complement, for Foucault, is not a theory or method but "spirituality", defined as "the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth" whether "purifications, ascetic exercises, renunciations, conversions of looking, modifications of existence" or some other "price to be paid for access to the truth" (p. 15). For Foucault (2006a):

> Spirituality postulates that the truth is never given to the subject by right.
>
> Spirituality postulates that the subject as such does not have right of access to the

> truth and is not capable of having access to the truth. It postulates that the truth is not given to the subject by a simple act of knowledge (connaissance), which would be founded and justified simply by the fact that he is the subject and because he possesses this or that structure of subjectivity. It postulates that for the subject to have right of access to the truth he must be changed, transformed, shifted, and become, to some extent and up to a certain point, other than himself. The truth is only given to the subject at a price that brings the subject's being into play. (p. 15)

Here, finally, is a conception of a subject that can serve as the basis for a theory of singularity. It is a theory that differs from Lazarus's in so far as it describes a mechanism whereby subjects transform themselves and gain the capability to produce singular thought. In Lazarus's theory of singularity, the space of the production of singularity is necessarily closed off, it is interior, as any theorizing about its status would risk the formulating of a general theory of singularity, a contradiction in terms. Foucault avoids creating a 'theory' of singularity by directing his focus towards the 'practices' of the transformation of the subject of singularity. But we have further to go still. In the original preface to second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault asked "in what way do individual or collective experiences arise from singular forms of thought—that is, from what constitutes the subject in its relations to the true, to rules, to itself?" (Foucault, 2010a, p. 336). Nowhere is this question more pressing than in the collective experience of emancipatory politics.

Political Spirituality in Iran

If spirituality is Foucault's name for the practices which allow for the transformation of the subject to enable the attainment of truth, it is when Foucault applies this concept to the realm of politics in the form of "political spirituality" that his insights have the most relevance for this research (Foucault, 2005b, p. 209). In fact, while we have first examined Foucault's elaboration of spirituality as a belated recognition of the implications of the questions posed by the Cercle d'Épistémologie, it's arguably the case that the experiences that Foucault had in Iran, which led him to name the concept of political spirituality, may have prompted him to seek out a similar notion in Greek antiquity (Bremner, 2020).

Foucault undertook two visits to Iran during the revolution of 1978 as a journalist and published several reports for two newspapers. Rather than dismissing these writings as "journalism and prediction" and therefore below the "more considered work of his lectures, books, or other writings" (Elden, 2017b, p. 102), we can instead choose to take Foucault at his own words. Speaking about his writing process for reported stories, Foucault said that when he wrote "for the newspapers, I write a bit as though I were writing a book…I pay attention…to what I'm saying" (Sassine & Foucault, 2018, p. 345). In reading these reports as a political inquiry akin to the inquiry that Lazarus proposes as the task for a political anthropologist, Foucault's investigations in Iran can be understood as an attempt to grasp a moment of political singularity. In fact, it is this consuming focus on singularity, shared by both Lazarus and Foucault, that has led some to castigate Foucault for his sympathy or blindness to the ultimate political form of the Islamic Republic, a political form that would look very different from the demands and the mobilizations in the streets (Afary & Anderson, 2005). However, without relitigating the specifics of Foucault's inquiry in Iran, his later reflections on the 'political

spirituality' he witnessed there offer insights into what exactly Foucault found so compelling in the political moment that was the Iranian Revolution.

It was in an article titled "*À qoui rêvent les Iraniens*?", published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* in October 1978 after Foucault's first trip to Iran, that Foucault first introduced the notion of "political spirituality" (Foucault, 2005b, p. 209). Foucault was very intrigued with the stated desire by people on the streets of Tehran and Qom for "an Islamic government" (p. 205). Though this same term was used by Ayatollah Khomeini, a popular political and religious exile who would eventually return and take power after the Shah, Foucault saw that the "religious leaders, students, intellectuals" and "former guerilla fighters" who he spoke to did not equate this with a state based in rule by a clergy (p. 205). Instead, the name Islamic government signified for these people, on the one hand, "an ideal" or else both a "notion of coming back to what Islam was at the time of the Prophet" based on "fidelity" rather than "obedience" and, on the other hand, "the introduction of a spiritual dimension into political life" (pp. 206-207). Foucault however refused to categorize the demand for Islamic government, too polysemic, as an ideal. Instead, he understood it as "political will", as an "effort to politicize structures that are inseparably social and religious in response to current problems" and "open a spiritual dimension in politics" (p. 208). It was this that he understood as "political spirituality", and though he would later shift his conception in ways we will examine, Foucault did not initially make a clear distinction between the concept of 'religious' and the 'spiritual' in the field of politics (p. 209). This is most evident when he refers to political spiritually as "this thing whose possibility we [in the 'West'] have forgotten since the Renaissance and the great crisis of Christianity" (p. 209). However, in response to criticism of his reporting, he would soon clarify.

His final article on the subject of the movement in Iran, "*Inutile de se soulever*?", was published in May 1979, and in it we can see Foucault already answering to a wave of criticism for his reporting (Foucault, 2005a, p. 263). Here, he is chiefly concerned with whether the "horror" at the turn towards an authoritarian political system that had taken hold in Iran should mean a disavowal of the uprising which so disrupted the everyday order of things and overthrew the shah (p. 263). Was the uprising, in a sense, a failure? Foucault would go on to lay out, explicitly, a striking orientation towards the emancipatory politics of uprising, striking both in its marked difference from the theory of politics as civil war that we explored in the previous chapter and in its similarity to politics in the thinking of Sylvain Lazarus. For Foucault (2005a):

> Uprisings belong to history, but in a certain way, they escape it. The movement through which a lone man, a group, a minority, or an entire people say, "I will no longer obey," and are willing to risk their lives in the face of a power that they believe to be unjust, seems to me to be irreducible. This is because no power is capable of making it absolutely impossible. Warsaw will always have its ghetto in revolt and its sewers populated with insurgents. The man in revolt is ultimately inexplicable. There must be an uprooting that interrupts the unfolding of history, and its long series of reasons why, for a man "really" to prefer the risk of death over the certainty of having to obey (p. 263).

For Foucault, an uprising was therefore "outside [of] history" in the sense that it was not reducible to historical or sociological analysis but rather a "singular phenomenon…that disrupted history" (Sassine & Foucault, 2018, pp. 334-335). He traces a line from a time when these uprisings "found their expression and their drama so readily in religious forms", where these forms and their promises of life after death or a reign of a savior figure where not an "ideological

cloak" but the "very manner in which these uprisings where lived", to a modern period organized around the concept of secular revolution (2005a, p. 264). For Foucault, this revolutionary problematic:

> gave these uprisings a legitimacy, sorted out their good and bad forms, and defined their laws of development. For uprisings, it established preliminary conditions, objectives, and ways of bringing them to an end. Even the profession of revolutionary was defined…uprising would appear in all its truth and continue to its true conclusion. This was a marvelous promise. Some will say that the uprising thus found itself colonized by *realpolitik* [emphasis original]. Others will say that the dimension of a rational history was opened to it. (p. 264)

Here again we can see a coinciding of Foucault and Lazarus in a rejection of the logic of determination when applied to the singularity of politics. Foucault understood the capture of the event of the uprising into the confining discourse of determining conditions, formalization, and strategy as an imposition of an outside logic onto an "enigma" (2005a, p. 264). In Iran, Foucault instead "tried to understand what was going on in the heads of these men and women when they risked their lives" and later to rescue the moment of uprising, that which was "not reducible", from the condescension of hindsight (pp. 264-266). For Foucault (2005a) this judgement from the moment after an uprising had passed was born out of "fear", both a fear of the idea that terror was inevitable and a fear of the stark and undeniable "fact that people rise up" and through this uprising:

> a subjectivity (not that of great men, but that of anyone) introduces itself into history and gives it its life. A delinquent puts his life on the line against abusive

> punishment, a madman cannot stand anymore being closed in and pushed down, or a people rejects a regime that oppresses it. This does not make the first one innocent, does not cure the second, and does not guarantee to the third the results that were promised. No one, by the way, is required to stand in solidarity with them. No one is required to think that these confused voices sing better than others and speak the truth in its ultimate depth. (pp. 265-266)

An uprising was always founded on "a will" and after all "a will is the activity of a subject" (Sassine & Foucault, 2018, pp. 339-341).

Foucault closed his final article with a comparison between himself, an admitted "intellectual", with the figure of "the strategist" (2005a, p. 266). The strategist could be "a politician, a historian, a revolutionary", the specifics did not matter, only that this figure, when faced with the event of the uprising, always sought to analyze the uprising's relation to "the needs of the whole" or "to a general principle" (pp. 266-267). In contrast, Foucault defined his "ethics" as "antistrategic", his principle was to "be respectful when a singularity arises" (p. 267). Here again the resonance with Lazarus is clear and the departure from Foucault's entire analytic of war and strategy as an analyzer of politics and history is unmistakable. A decisive event has occurred in Foucault's thought and an entirely new theory of politics as rupture and singularity has been left in its wake.

Though Foucault's notion of a political spirituality was originally understood in reference to the politics of the Iranian Revolution and their relation to Islam, Oksala (2022) stresses that, in invoking a political spirituality, Foucault was not putting forth a commitment to "religious belief and practice as such that would provide a foundation for politics" (p. 665). Instead, because

"spirituality is irrevocable connected to the constitution of the subject" and "can be found in virtually all political, social, and cultural movements and revolutions", Foucault's formulation of political spirituality was "an attempt to find new meaning in politics itself" (Oksala, 2022, pp. 665–666). In a recently revealed interview in *Le Nouvel Observateur* on January 3rd, 1979, that remained unpublished during his life (Bremner, 2020, p. 119), Foucault expounded upon his concept of political spirituality (Foucault, 2020). Asked whether he thought that "religion becoming…a dissident space of resistance to the state and to those who embody it" could be considered a "generalizable hypothesis", Foucault insisted on the necessity of "appropriately distinguish[ing]" between religion and spirituality (p. 123). For Foucault, while religion included a sense of spirituality, it could also be found "outside of religion", notably in "Greek civilization", something he will return to in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (2006a) lectures of 1981-1982 as we've seen (Foucault, 2020, p. 123). For Foucault (2020), spirituality was

> a certain practice by which the individual is displaced, transformed, disrupted, to the point of renouncing their own individuality, their own subject position. It's no longer being the subject that one had been up to that point, a subject in relation to a political power, but also the subject of a certain mode of knowledge [savoir], subject of an experience, or subject of a belief. [A] possibility of rising up from the subject position that had been fixed for you by a political power, a religious power, a dogma, a belief, a habit, a social structure, and so on—that's spirituality, that is, becoming other than what one is, other than oneself (p. 124)

In fact, rather than the source of all spirituality, religion was both a possible repository for spirituality but also a place of "restriction", "prescri[ption]", and "codification" of spirituality (p. 124).

For Foucault, spirituality and "becoming other" was what was "at the heart of the revolutionary will" (p. 127). Here Foucault also approached something like a theory for the limitation and lapsing of a political sequence. He argues, for example, that "a Russian, having experienced what he had from 1917 on, can't locate in Marxism or socialism or dialectical materialism a principle for spirituality, for the uprising of subjects," even if previous subjects could in the past. Foucault sensed the way in which a certain tradition of political thought, like that associated with the October Revolution, could lose its force in so far as it failed to provide space for the transformation of subjects. Foucault was grappling with the same problem that vexed Louis Althusser when he identified a crisis of Marxism in the late 1970s. The sense that the political force of the communist movement in Western Europe and the socialist countries in Eastern Europe, which had drawn its strength from the moment of the October Revolution, was attenuating and that Marxist political theory was not theoretically adequate to account for why this was occurring. We ended with Foucault's conception of politics as rupture, uprising, and singularity and the beginnings of an answer as to why the name of October 1917 was failing to mobilize people in the way that it once had. Both Foucault and Lazarus attempt to offer answers to the crisis of Marxism, seeing politics as a rare singular experience with a beginning and end. Neither aspired to provide a determinative account of why and how these singularities occur for the precise reason that such an account would be impossible, because it would necessarily be general. For Lazarus, the subject of singular thought is people but beyond that a necessary gap exists between singular thought and the thought of it. For Foucault, we have the rudiments of a theory of the subject of politics as a transformable self-relation which produces singular thought.

Conclusion

The distance traveled between a concept of politics as civil war and a concept of politics as singular thought is considerable. In the first conception, politics is an often violent, always antagonistic, process whereby rival collectivities engage in a struggle without end. In this understanding, politics is permanent and exists in even the most local techniques and tactics. Politics may appear to change, but its basis is always an irreconcilable antagonism that runs through and defines society. This is a politics of organization and strategy. A politics as singular thought, on the other hand, is not reducible to a pre-existing antagonism. Sociology or economics or philosophy may attempt to explain why people obey an order or refrain from challenging a power, but these disciplines struggle to understand why people stand up and risk their positions or even their lives to transform themselves and their society. In this understanding, politics is rare and impermanent. It is not occurring all the time and will not necessarily lead to a resolution or a better world. This is a politics of singularity and rupture. This thesis was an exploration of two strikingly divergent conceptions of politics in the work of Michel Foucault.

In the first chapter of this thesis, we accepted Étienne Balibar's provocation to "explore the effects of a reversibility of politics and war" in Foucault's work (Balibar, 2017, p. 166). We traced the development of the concept of civil war in Foucault's work over the course of several years. From the first of his writings in his 'genealogical period', Foucault experimented with an analysis of history as the struggle of forces linked to an understanding of politics as a perpetual and permanent civil war. This civil or social war was the real process whereby the strategies and apparatuses of penality, exploitation, and disciplining were developed and extended through society. The waging of this war did not preserve these apparatuses but constituted them at a fundamental level. At the same time, it was the very waging of this struggle that formed and

cohered its constitutive opposing collectivities. In a sense, this civil war pre-empted the participants who waged it.

As Foucault's thinking progressed over the next several years, the theoretical link between history as a struggle of forces and a politics as a struggle of forces began to fray. Foucault's development of this line of thinking culminated in a dizzying investigation into the history of his own concept of politics as civil war. What he uncovered was a political and discursive struggle that wielded history as but one weapon among many. Accompanying the dawn of modernity in both England and France, political movements and classes, new and old, attempted to rally their forces and subdue their enemies through a historical discourse of political struggle and conquest. Though initially lauding this discourse for its candor, partisanship, and structural similarity to his own, Foucault's assessment began to change. This change was due to the alterations made to this discourse by the French bourgeoisie who, in an effort to justify their position and introduce the possibility of a peaceful settlement in this civil war, introduced a dialectical logic into this history that established the possibility of a societal reconciliation. It is this reconciliation that allows this discourse to transform into a racist logic of purification. Presented with this, Foucault rejects this model of politics and, for a time at least, is left without one.

In the second chapter of this thesis, we undertook a comparative reading of the work of Sylvain Lazarus and the later work of Michel Foucault. Through this reading we explored their differing understandings of singularity and of the irreducibility of politics. We unpacked several of Lazarus's key concepts and questioned whether they could serve as an analysis which would take us away from one of necessary antagonism. Reading Lazarus's critique in *Anthropology of the Name* of Foucault's conception of singularity presented in *The Order of Things* sharpened

our understanding of their different approaches to conceptualizing the emergence of the new in thought. To fully understand this critique, we explored an exchange referenced by Lazarus between Foucault and a group of philosophy students and graduates known as the Cercle d'Épistémologie. The Cercle also read *The Order of Things* and asked Foucault a series of methodological questions that he answered in a response and then further elaborated upon in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Our interest, as well as Lazarus's interest, in these questions hinged on the fact that Foucault was unable to provide an adequate account of whether a general theory of singularity was possible (or desirable) and of where the researcher was to be positioned in the investigation of singularity.

With the use of Knox Peden's reading of this exchange with the Cercle, we found an answer to both of these questions in Foucault's late work on spirituality and the subject. Foucault investigates early Christian and ancient Greek thought to find a concept of a subject of knowledge who can transform themselves through care of the self, the deliberate act of practice and ritual which opens the way for an understanding of a truth. Reading this politically in the form of Foucault's concept of political spirituality, we found a theory of politics as singular thought founded on a transformable subject and a rupture in their everyday reality. A theory of politics that Foucault developed through his inquiry during the Iranian Revolution.

This thesis suggests several directions for further research. Additional research on the relation between Foucault and Lazarus could examine their differing concepts of political organization. Lazarus's recent work, *Subjective Singularities* (2022), suggests a reformulation of Lazarus's understanding that all politics is necessarily organized politics based on his experience of political inquiry among the *Gilets jaunes* protests. This may be fruitfully compared to what could be called Foucault's missing theory of the party between the concept of the

"governmentality of the party" (Foucault, 2010b, p. 191) suggested in the 1978-1979 *Birth of Biopolitics* lectures and the "practices of direction" (Foucault, 2016, p. 233) in political parties hinted at in the 1979-1980 *On the Government of the Living* lectures. Another path of possible research could be a broader comparison and historical study of the many contemporary French thinkers of history, ontology, and the irreducibility of politics, including Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou. These thinkers could be read and contextualized in their relation to Louis Althusser and his commitment to a scientism in the realm of politics and philosophy as well as his and their responses to the events of May 1968. A question guiding this research would be to ask whether a connection between sociological, economic, or historical inquiry and the thought and practice of politics is possible (or desirable) or whether and how the question itself is due in part to contingent historical events. Additionally, one could ask whether, in the absence of a relation between structures and political events, a conception of the subject must necessarily be grounded in a trans-historical position with certain innate characteristics and capabilities

Foucault's two conceptions of politics do not exhaust all the possibilities of a theory of politics, but the gap between them does attest to a significant shift in Foucault's thinking. It is this protean quality to his thought that can hopefully be a model to others when it comes time to begin again to think and practice politics.

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