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Special Issue Michel Foucault and the Historiography of Science

From the Editor

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For some time now, we have wanted to publish a special issue devoted to studying the relations between Michel Foucault and the history of science. Today, at last, our readers have the contribution of *Transversal: International Journal for the Historiography of Science* to the discussions on these complex relations. This special issue certainly does not exhaust this field of study, but it opens several exciting avenues for reflection and new research.

The history of sciences in the French historian-philosopher's work goes back to his first studies on the history of psychology and his first books on history of psychiatry, medicine and the human sciences (published during his lifetime) from the 1960s. At that time, he explicitly inscribed his historical-philosophical reflection in the French epistemological tradition, particularly in the wake of the work produced by such figures as Gaston Bachelard, Alexandre Koyré, Jean Cavailles, and Georges Canguilhem after the interwar period.

In an important book published in Portuguese a little over four decades ago – probably the first dedicated to Michel Foucault's work and not yet translated into other languages – the Brazilian philosopher Roberto Machado (1981) demonstrated how an essential part of the methodological basis of the author of *Les Mots et les Choses* was taken up not without modifications from the French epistemological tradition. For example, notions such as the Bachelardian idea of “recurrence” were fundamental for configuring the temporal layers of Foucault's *épistémès* or even in his late studies on ethics. But, insisted Machado, he took this notion up again after the redefinitions imposed on it by Koyré and Canguilhem.

Therefore, the inscription in this tradition did not mean fidelity to a school and implied a series of displacements. François Delaporte (2007) demonstrated, for example, how in *Naissance de la Clinique*, Foucault critically confronted the conceptual vocabulary of the author of *Le Nouvel Esprit Scientifique* and sought to rethink a series of notions that Bachelard had situated in the field of psychoanalysis to the detriment of historical analysis. At the same time, I might add, through the notion of “knowledge”, explicitly developed in his *Archéologie du Savoir*, Foucault neutralized and, put in other terms, the Bachelardian opposition between scientific knowledge and common sense or even that between poetics and epistemology.

If we dwell further on this period, it is not unimportant to observe how Foucault simultaneously introduced into the study of this history a whole series of materials and domains hitherto little considered by the epistemological tradition. For example, his *Histoire de la Folie* analyzed more than medical treatises and psychiatric theories on madness. Regulations, legislation, ordinances, administrative and police documents, literary and

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iconographic documents, in short, a whole series of archival materials (the later famous *Lettres de Cachets*, for example) were mobilized in his historical-philosophical study. At the same time, the birth of certain institutions of seclusion, medical or social, and the way they were shaped after the Classical Age received particular attention in his research.

With this new approach, Foucault moved philosophy into the archives and transformed the very domain of investigation of the history of sciences, shifting from an analysis of scientific discourses to a history of their extra-scientific conditions of possibility. Although, at the same time, even on the one hand, we can observe that Foucault remained philosophically connected to the problem of reason as it had been formulated in works by historians and philosophers such as Bachelard, Cavaillès, and Koyré from the interwar period and in the wake of the introduction of phenomenological thought in France, on the other hand it is necessary to highlight how he shifted this problem to the domain of the practices and “social institutions that in fact produce the norms of health and illness, normality and madness” (Rancière 2018, 336). Paul Veyne (2008) saw in this displacement a profound reconfiguration of the relations between history and philosophy and Jacques Rancière, a singular “widening of the philosophical scene” and a new interest in what he termed the “great reason” at the expense of the “little reason of philosophers” (Rancière 2018, 336).

The way to an encounter with historians was open. And in fact, his books were not disregarded by them at that time. But the relationship with historians of science was not necessarily smooth. As Malika Sager (2022) demonstrates, the English reception of *The Birth of the Clinic* did not fail to underline the profound differences between the French historian-philosopher's conceptions and those of historians of medicine like E. H. Ackerknecht, O. Temkin, and H. E. Sigerist, opening a chasm between him and traditional historians. Foucault's controversy with the historian of medicine Jacques Léonard is an example of this tension. The very definition of the object of this history was at stake, and Foucault did not fail to return to this example to mark the distinctions between the conceptual history and the social history of science. But his interest, beginning in the 1970s, in George Rosen's work on social medicine demonstrates that this relationship was not made only under the sign of polemics. Likewise, we cannot forget that the then Columbia University professor published in 1967, shortly before the release of his *Madness in Society* (Rosen 1968), a very favorable review of *Histoire de la Folie* (Foucault 1965), released in English in New York in 1965 (Rosen 1967).

From the 1970s on, the history of science did not disappear from Michel Foucault's horizon of interest. On the contrary, it was integrated into his investigations that turned their attention to the problem of power relations. Social medicine, psychoanalysis, psychiatry, economics, statistics, penal sciences, and a whole series of other sciences began to be questioned based on this new interest. Previously considered by Foucault only from the epistemic viewpoint, the human sciences themselves began to be interrogated from the meshes of power. It was no longer a question of a history of how man became, at the same time, an object and subject of knowledge in Western thought, but of knowing how, through the constitution of new technologies of power (disciplinary system, normalization) aimed at individuals, knowledge such as pedagogy, psychology, criminology, etc. could be constituted. With the notion of biopower or biopolitics, the life sciences began to be questioned from a different perspective. At the same time, books such as *La volonté de Savoir* demonstrated how biopolitics was a condition of possibility for a whole series of social sciences such as demography, for example. To develop this research, at that time, he was forced to create an entire series of instruments and tools that countless historians would widely take up.

This brief presentation shows us how any dossier on the relations between Michel Foucault and the history of science that pretends to be exhaustive is doomed to failure. The range of domains to which his intelligence was directed could be characterized as encyclopedic in the short period of just over two decades. I have pointed out here only a

series of multiple paths through which his work intersected with the historical trajectory of different sciences. Beyond them, I could also mention the enormous importance and impact of his work on the historiography of the sciences. This is because his work opened new paths to be followed by new research or because his work reoriented many historiographical trends. The opening of Foucault's archives to public consultation, the publication of all the courses he taught at the Collège de France, and the numerous book manuscripts (some dating from before the 1960s, such as those recently published [Foucault 2021; Foucault 2022]) will fuel for many years to come reflection and research on his relations with the history of science. Our goal with this special issue was only to reaffirm the importance of this historiographical work.

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