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MICHEL FOUCAULT AND LEISURE¹

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Michel Foucault is an emblem of post-structuralism, postmodernism, and associated theoretical and artistic movements. For those on the left, his displacement of the concept of ideology with discourse has delivered us from the Marxist split between base and superstructure ‘under’ a given mode of production.

In terms of Foucault’s contribution to thinking about leisure, arguably the core aspect is anti-psychological. He interrogates the discourse of the human and the conditions of its emergence, arguing that people become individuals through discourses and institutions of culture. They undergo a simultaneous internalization and externalization, individuation and collectivization. It may well be that subjection derives from forces connected to production, class conflict or ideology. But Foucault maintains that the loci and logic of governance are not merely to be found amongst the interests or persuasions of the class that controls it, because government operates at a micro level as well as through and because of general economic forces.

Foucault rejects deterministic account of interiority in his skepticism about the psy-function and its account of basic needs (such as work and leisure). This clearly runs counter to the visionary perspective in the study of leisure, which links it to consciousness, values, and civilization in a heritage that runs from classical Greek philosophy to contemporary social psychology. It also distances him from the pragmatic tradition, which applies rational public policy to ameliorate inequalities, though there has been an uptake of Foucault by cultural-policy technocrats (Rojek, 2012: 3; Miller and Yúdice, 2002).

So what is Foucault’s criticism of these assumptions about human needs for, *inter alia*, leisure? His term ‘the psy-function’ describes a shifting field of knowledge and power over the mind. It is comprised of psychoanalysis, psychology, psychotherapy, psychiatry, social psychology, criminology, and psycho-pharmacology, and their success in sites of discipline – educational, military, industrial, recreational, and carceral (Foucault, 2006: 85–86, 189–90). The idea that recreation might be qualitatively different from, and richer than, these other experiences of life is inimical to such an account.

Foucault sought to uncover how mental conditions came to be identified as problems in need of treatment through forms of demographic problematization that functioned as techniques, economies, social relations, and knowledges. They were the means whereby ‘some real existent in the world’ became ‘the target of social regulation at a given moment’

(Foucault, 1994: 123; 2001: 171). He defined madness, for instance, as ‘the absence of work’ (Foucault, 1995) rather than a psychological condition.

Foucault argued that struggles for power take place over:

the status of the individual: on the one hand, they assert the right to be different, and they underline everything that makes individuals truly individual. On the other hand, they attack everything which separates the individual, breaks his links with others, splits up community life, forces the individual back on himself and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way.

(Foucault, 1982: 781, 777–78)

In the words of the late liberation psychologist Ignacio Martín-Baró, ‘there does not first exist a person, who then goes on to become socialized’. Rather, the ‘individual becomes an individual, a human person, by virtue of becoming socialized’ (Martín-Baró, 1996: 69). The raw stuff of human beings, then, is not individuals: people *become* individuals through the discourses and institutions of culture, in an oscillation between the law, economy, and politics, with the psy-function operating as a switching-point between people’s proclivities and aptitudes (Foucault, 2006: 58, 190). The same applies to discourses about assumed basic needs, such as the practice of leisure.

This micro level of analysis centers the formation of public subjects – people as invoked by leisure policy, in this case. The determining logics applied to these subjects do not necessarily provide intelligible accounts of action if they are always led back to the economic or the psychological. In short, Foucault’s account of the social redispenses dialectical reasoning away from the grand stages of history or psyche and towards an analysis of conjunctures. Leisure Studies can benefit from Foucault’s direct consideration of consumption and pleasure and his more generalized address of ethical self-formation and the government of people (McNamee, 2000).

More direct articulations between Foucault and leisure derive from his address of sport in the context of early Western philosophy’s quest for an ethics of the self that would inculcate and evaluate fitness to rule others. In Ancient Greece and Rome, the body was the locus of a combat with pleasure and pain that disclosed the inner truth of people and schooled the mastery needed to control their drives (Foucault, 1986). Austerity and hedonism could be combined through training:

The metaphor of the match, of athletic competition and battle, did not serve merely to designate the nature of the relationship one had with desires and pleasures, with their force that was always liable to turn seditious or rebellious; it also related to the preparation that enabled one to withstand such a confrontation.

(Foucault, 1986: 72)

Xenophon, Socrates, and Diogenes held that sexual excess and decadence came from the equivalent of sporting success. In sex and sport, triumph could lead to failure, unless accompanied by regular examination of the conscience, and physical training. Carefully modulated desire in both spheres became a sign of the ability to govern. Aristotle and Plato favoured regular, ongoing flirtations with excess, as tests as well as pleasures. This ethos was distinctly gendered: the capacity of young men to move into positions of social responsibility was judged by charioteering and man-management. Their ability to win ‘the little sports drama’ was akin to dealing with sexually predatory older males (Foucault, 1986: 72–77, 104,

120, 197–98, 212). Clearly, this history brings into question the separation of work from leisure just as conclusively as latter-day commodification, corporatization, and post-industrialization do. It therefore encourages us to query the notion of transcendent psychological needs and the basis for a separation of employment from fun.

Roman sexual ethics attached additional anxieties to the body and leisure because spirituality had emerged. It complicated exercises of the self as ways of preparing men to govern:

increased medical involvement in the cultivation of the self appears to have been expressed through a particular and intense form of attention to the body. This attention is very different from that manifested by the positive valuation of physical vigor during an epoch when gymnastics and athletic and military training were an integral part of the education of a free man. Moreover, it has something paradoxical about it since it is inscribed, at least in part, within an ethics that posits that death, disease, or even physical suffering do not constitute true ills and that it is better to take pains over one's soul than to devote one's care to the maintenance of the body. But in fact the focus of attention in these practices of the self is the point where the ills of the body and those of the soul can communicate with one another and exchange their distresses; where the bad habits of the soul can entail physical miseries, while the excesses of the body manifest and maintain the failings of the soul. ... The body the adult has to care for, when he is concerned about himself, is no longer the young body that needed shaping by gymnastics; it is a fragile, threatened body, undermined by petty miseries.

(Foucault, 1988: 56–57).

In place of personal excesses, which had preoccupied fourth-century BC Athens, first-century AD Rome was principally concerned with the finitude of fitness and life. Arguments were imbued with 'nature and reason', and exercises of the self joined this more elevated search for truth (Foucault, 1988: 238–39). Foucault's studies indicate how leisure has been central to social control, in two senses. On the one hand, it is subject to individual controls for managing desire. On the other, it is subject to collective methods for managing families (Foucault, 2003: 251).

Dave Andrews (1993), Samantha King (2008), Ben Carrington (2010), Brooke Johnson (2010), and C. L. Cole (1998) have all drawn on Foucault. Their work indicates how his methods can be providential for political economy, feminism, and critical race theory as applied to leisure, from basketball to advertising and from celebrity feminism to social activism. They maintain the non-humanist base to Foucault, and his commitment to discourse and power, without losing the significance of social movements and the political economy.

But numerous progressive scholars are ambivalent or condemnatory in their evaluations of Foucault's legacy for understanding leisure. Feminist critiques and Gramscian-inflected ideas of hegemony have provided vital means of attacking the prior dominance of reactionary celebrations and instrumentalizations of leisure. For many analysts working in these traditions, Foucault is endowing power with an agency of its own, while eviscerating subjects from history (*cf.* Gruneau, 1993 and 1999).

Trotskyite Jean Marie Brohm, a central figure in leftist theorizations of leisure, scorns the eclecticism that mixes and matches Foucault with Marx because primacy 'must' be given to means and modes of production and class struggle (Brohm and Bui-Xuan, 2005). Before he turned to the right, John Hargreaves (1986: 135) decried 'the danger of a Foucaultian analysis of consumer culture' because of 'the implication that control programmes actually

achieve their desired effects'. Ian R. Henry (2001: 3) argues that there has been virtually no Foucauldian influence on studies of leisure policy. Garry Robson's recuperation of Millwall Football Club fans from the dustbin of racist proletarian masculinism (Robson, 2000: 71–72, 77) criticizes the supposed 'passivity' inscribed on people by Foucault. Valda Burstyn (1999: 33) says that gendered leisure power is tied to the expression of interests, rather than being multifaceted, as per Foucauldian feminism. Chris Rojek (2012), while not critical of Foucault *per se*, and arguably an early proponent of his work within Leisure Studies, laments the hasty exclusion of Marxism from the field after the decline of state socialism, given the clear determinations of money and class on the rich world, especially since the crisis that began in 2008.

But active if socially marginalized subjects are very present in Foucault: the mad, the ill, the deviant, the incarcerated, the racialized, and the gendered. And he took public political actions in support of those groups, participating in numerous social movements and contributing to public debate (Foucault, 1980; 1989; 1991; 2003).

As we have seen, the subject is neither a point of origin in Foucault nor a destination, because subjects vary with time and space. This is an affront to conceptions of consciousness that posit the reasoning person at the heart of social activity, whether they be psychological or political. But it does not in any way preclude politics, choice, or social-movement activism. If there were no room for agency, why have so many feminists, queers, medical professionals, prison activists, and post-colonial critics found value in Foucault's work and persona?

Both protagonists and antagonists suggest that Foucault's work was opposed to grand narratives. As a consequence his influence is deemed either baleful or useful, based on the analyst's views of power and discourse (Wiggins and Mason, 2005: 48; Markula and Denison, 2005: 166; Morgan, 1995). At some times Foucault is valorized for decentering traditional norms of writing and agents of history. At others, he is derided for encouraging sectarian social movements and irrationality. This idealist version of Foucault says that he discounts the real in favor of a focus on language, licensing a free play of the signifier. But while Foucault was attracted by philosophy at the limit, he was vitally concerned with the manufacture and governance of rules – and their inevitability.

Industrialized and post-industrialized societies alike subject people to bodily and ethical regimes that equate body and mind. The body is a 'site of condensation for a whole range of social anxieties' in an era of self-responsibility. Moral panics and calculations of risk are diurnal forms of social control and calculation, rendering the disciplined body a key analytic tool (King, 2005: 25–26). This Foucauldian insight has proven especially fruitful in engaging the impact of masculinity on leisure (Mangan, 1999; Miller, 2001; Pringle, 2005; Blackshaw, 2003).

The work of governments in normalizing leisure has historically been crucial: policing holidays in order to standardize vacations and regularize recreation as play and spectatorship; securing the conditions of existence for a partial commodification that makes sport governed rather than classically competitive; and allocating resources to leisure as a diplomatic symbol and domestic training mechanism. The state is also concerned with leisure as a route to improved urban public health, military fitness, and the diversion of rebellious politics. From Chancellor Hitler and Marshal Pétain to President Carter, modern heads of state have initiated physical-fitness tests in order to invigorate and ideologize the young; for example, Rational Recreation, the human-relations movement, and their affines are part of a long heritage emphasizing the paradox that productive workers must be entertained as well as disciplined.

Scholars have found value in Foucault's work to help in analyzing such developments. Numerous investigations have been made of school sports, marching, drills, gymnastics, and physical education (PE). David Kirk (1998) has demonstrated how gendered regimes of corporeal regulation, individualization, and differentiation underpinned PE in colonial and post-colonial Australia, intersecting with eugenics, racism, and national efficiency and fitness. Beyond white-settler histories, Foucault's work has also stimulated inquiry into the South Asian body disciplined through leisure (Mills and Dimeo, 2003). Despite his misgivings, John Hargreaves (1986) argued that the cardinal values of contemporary school sport and PE programs are disciplinary, and Burstyn (1999: 78–79, 99) uses Foucault's history of the body. Jean Harvey and Robert Sparks (1991) show how PE and gymnastics in the late nineteenth century dovetailed with bio-power, Susan Brownell (2000) looks at China disciplining its citizenry through sport, and Helena Wulff (2003) examines the nationalist rhetoric of Irish dance as social control.

And there are numerous other sites of Foucauldian influence in work on leisure: studies of football² 'hooligans' that reject both their romantic annunciation as working-class scions and their criminalization via moral panics (Armstrong and Young, 1997; Armstrong, 1998); assessments of the panoptic design of contemporary football stadia (Giulianotti, 1999: 80–82); accounts of masculinist domination and feminist resistance and critique (Jennifer Hargreaves, 1994; Duncan, 1994; Montez de Oca, 2005; Rahilly, 2005; Pringle, 2005; Chisholm, 1999 and 2002; Miller, 2001); interrogations of women's football and cultural citizenship (Giardina and Metz, 2005); and analyses of racism and leisure (Ismond, 2003; King and Springwood, 2001; Gardiner and Welch, 2001; Carrington, 2010).

Cole (1998) suggests that bodies at play appear to embody free will, self-control, health, productivity, and transcendence (also see MacNeill, 1998). Patricia Vertinsky (1998) highlights the medicalization of women's bodies in the Victorian era, which still permeates health-and-fitness promotion campaigns. Since the Second World War, additional factors have made bio-power crucial. The contest for international sporting supremacy between the former protagonists in the Cold War, developments in pharmaceutical research, increasing commodification, and the dominance of instrumental rationality have seen biomedical science applied to enhance performance and identify deviance. Shari Lee Dworkin and Faye Linda Wachs (2009) use Foucault to investigate HIV panics and athletes (also see Pronger, 1998). King (2001) questions the corporate social-responsibility ethos of companies that use fitness to elevate their public standing.

Away from the governance of leisure, its codification, there are said to be new and powerful liberties, ripe for their utopian humanistic plucking by Foucauldianism. A deregulated, individuated world supposedly makes consumers into producers, frees the disabled from confinement, encourages new subjectivities, rewards intellect and competitiveness, links people across cultures, and allows billions of flowers to bloom in a post-political cornucopia. It's a kind of Marxist/Godardian wet dream, where people fish, film, frolic, fornicate, and finance from morning to midnight. Production is discounted, labor forgotten, and consumption sovereign. Leisure overdetermines work.

These cybertarian ideas of leisure say that deregulated, individuated media making turns consumers into producers and subcultural rebels – this includes blogging or posting videos online to riff on commercial culture or right-wing demagoguery, clicking on a link for virtual anti-war or environmental activism, mocking bourgeois manners, goading the law from cyberspace, or simply celebrating alternative lifestyles. 'Prosumers', putatively freed from social convention, experiment with new subjectivities, find rewards for intellect and competitiveness, and network with people across cultures in a post-political cornucopia (Zwick *et al.*, 2008; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010).

The idea of a proactive leisure consumer is quite capacious, though its claims don't stand up once we understand the limits imposed by technology and the political economy that the consumer inhabits. For example, the possibilities for green leisure can be seen in media commodities' material effects on the planet (Maxwell and Miller, 2012). And as Andrew Ross says of prosumption, it refers to consumers who undertake work that producers used to pay for (2009).

Conclusions

This chapter has offered a brief tour of Foucault's relevance for thinking about leisure by looking at three principal elements of his work. The first was Foucault's problematization of the psy-function, which helps us to bring into question the essentialism underpinning the doctrines of fundamental human needs that inform theories and policies of leisure. The second field of work was his the engagement with Ancient Greek and Roman philosophy to see how bodies at play were sites for learning and demonstrating the capacity for leadership, where model forms of citizenship could be encapsulated. Here, the major implication is that, regardless of prevailing modes of production, distinctions between work and leisure have always been problematic and leisure is as much a form of governance as its supposed other. The third domain was associated scholarship and activism, where we saw that the wide array of researchers inspired by Foucault's work casts doubt on accusations that his work is theoreticist or that it regards people as passive rather than active.

Notes

- 1 This chapter draws on Miller, 2009. I should say at the outset that I am not an expert in the study of leisure or tourism. Many of the sources used here are from the narrower sphere of sport and the wider one of culture. I hope that the result is nevertheless of use to readers.
- 2 I refer here to real football, not the 60-minute stroll 16 times a year that laughably claims the name in the Yanqui lexicon.

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