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The Technology of Biopower A Response to Todd May's "Foucault Now?"

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Because the occasion for his essay was the inaugural conference of the newly formed Foucault Society in New York City in the spring of 2005, Todd May takes as his point of departure the question of whether Foucault's work is valuable to the sort of people who have come together to form that society: philosophers, artists, political activists, and in general to concerned citizens today, twenty years after Michel Foucault's death. As might be expected given the Society's *raison d'être*, May answers this question in the affirmative. But exactly how is Foucault's work still relevant? It is his answer to this latter question that is the philosophical substance of May's address.

In the course of pursuing this question—which he phrases as “Foucault Now?”—May makes a point that at first seems to tell against his conviction that Foucault's work still has much to teach. He acknowledges that Foucault never claimed to be presenting us with a timeless picture of the human condition; on the contrary, Foucault's central point was that history occurs as a series of utterly contingent events that shape human beings in their contingency. How and who we are may not have anything in common with how and who people were in earlier times. That being the case, Foucault's relevance is all the more contestable: If history has given us living conditions importantly different from the living conditions of our predecessors, even those of only twenty years ago, might not we ourselves already be so different from Foucault and his generation that his descriptions and analyses no longer have anything to say to us? Or at least might Foucault's texts have an expiration date, even if it has not quite yet arrived?

May has no intention of arguing that, on the contrary, Foucault's works are timeless. Like everything Foucault examined, his own analyses are eminently perishable, and May emphasizes that point. But he insists that the expiration date is probably yet a long way off—not because important changes have not occurred since 1985, changes that may have significantly changed us, but because we still need Foucault's methods and analytic style to take account of and assess those changes, as well as to resist what we find

oppressive in them. Those people who would have us believe that everything is different now—given the revolution in computer chip technology, the fall of the Soviet Union, 9/11—are not moving beyond Foucault, May contends; instead they are refusing the methodological insights that Foucault offers by reverting to a modernist tendency to espouse a unified, totalized story about the world rather than paying attention to the fragmentary details that a genealogical method does not allow us to overlook.

May mentions Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard in this connection. Deleuze says society no longer operates as Foucault says it does in *Discipline and Punish* and elsewhere. We are not a normalized society, Deleuze holds, but a control society. We are disciplined not by statistical and spatial distributions as Foucault discusses in such depth but rather by the techniques of surveillance and management possible only in an age of instant communication. Baudrillard, too, emphasizes the technological changes in communication and imaging that have occurred in recent years and argues that we are shaped as subjects in the midst of the “hyper-real.” Foucault’s accounts of architecture and regimented corporeal practices are therefore passé, he maintains. May also notes that there is an increasing number of thinkers who assert that economic globalization has so changed the field within which subjectivities emerge and attempt to work, consume, and sustain themselves that it makes no sense to use analytic models of selfhood or society from two decades ago.

May does a fine job of showing that all these announcements of our collective departure from the normalized world that Foucault describes are really not advances into the post-modern so much as returns to the modern. They are attempts to understand by generalizing and covering over minute differences that, according to Foucault and May, make all the difference “on the ground.” Our present, May asserts, is simply not reducible to any monolithic explanation. Even if things are radically different from the way they were twenty years ago, if we are to understand how they are different and what difference those differences make, we need to approach our world as Foucault approached his—genealogically, responsively, attentively, attuned to its depth and detail. Have technological changes really rendered corporeal disciplinary practices and sexual normalization, for example, obsolete? Have fiber-optic and satellite technologies really rendered surveillance unnecessary, or have they just made new kinds of surveillance possible—now that people can implant tracking devices under their children’s skin and ask their cars or their cell phones where to turn to find the nearest public restroom or luxury hotel? Have adventures in cyberspace displaced sexuality as a source of knowledge and pleasure, belonging and identity, docility and control, or has computer technology simply extended the disciplinary practices of sexuality farther than ever before, into populations and moments previously impervious to many of its effects? May is skeptical

of claims that our world has changed radically in the last two decades. But, he insists, opining from an armchair is no way to settle the matter. We need to investigate. We need to practice something like genealogy to answer questions like this and to understand how these changes operate or shift in operation over time. And that is precisely why Foucault's work is still relevant; Foucault's work shows us how to engage our own world, different and changing though it may be, in a careful interrogation so that we can learn just what is at stake in each technological, political, economic, or social shift.

Most importantly, May claims, it is only by really understanding how we got here—which is what genealogy enables us to do—that we can see what possibilities remain to us for changing things. The only way to imagine and bring forth a future different from the present is to see how the present evolved from the contingencies of the past. Seeing what was and what happened enables us to see what might have been otherwise and what still might become otherwise. Genealogy, unlike the totalizing discursive gaze from above, demonstrates the play within the system, revealing the freedom that is still ours to exercise. Foucault is important now because Foucault affirms our importance as actors in an open-ended story. The future does not lie curled up in a painful present, Foucault shows us. It is not already there just waiting to unfold. It must be made. And we can have a hand in that making. Foucault's work offers hope.

The hope, and help, it offers is not just or even primarily a product of the facts and methodology it presents us, May suggests. If that were so, we could read the texts and set them aside, having gleaned from them all that we need to know. But May thinks even those of us who have read the texts thoroughly, even many times, have reason to return to them now and in the foreseeable future. For reading Foucault, May says, is not an exercise in the excavation of facts but rather an exercise in spiritual cultivation; it is a way of remembering, renewing, and reconstituting ourselves. Foucault's texts—like the texts of the ancients, Marcus Aurelius's or Epictetus's perhaps—can serve not just to educate us but to orient us intellectually, to point us in the direction of anti-normalizing self-development. They are models of genealogical thinking, but they also draw us into an enactment of genealogical thinking as we read; they put us through our genealogical paces, so to speak, put us in mind of the contingency of things and prevent our thinking from hardening into set categories and definitive analyses. The practice of reading that reading Foucault's texts teach is a self-transformative practice—no matter how many times our eyes might scan the pages.

I agree with May wholeheartedly that Foucault's texts can be used as a means of self-cultivation. I agree that his work—especially its genealogical approach—is still very relevant to our present, regardless of changes in techniques of population management and social control. I agree that Deleuze and Baudrillard and others are wrong to sound the death knell for

normalization and its counter, genealogy. But I do want to raise one question for May, and that is this: To what extent *is* normalization—in fact the entire biopolitical *dispositif* that Foucault described in relentless detail—dependent on some specific technological forms?

Like May, I am skeptical of the idea that high tech innovations have done or are likely to do much if anything to alter biopower in its basic functioning and the directions of its spread. Despite liberal hopes that new technologies such as the internet would have a democratizing or freeing effect, creating difference by decentralizing authority, biopower (as Foucault has shown) operates quite well in decentralized fashion; and more and quicker access to individual bodies and local practices make normalization and population management easier, not more difficult. Biopower is not at risk in technological innovation. But, I would contend, it is not simply immune to any and all technological change. Surely some forms of technological collapse would seriously undermine the institutions and repetitive practices of biopower by hampering their access and extension. After all, as Foucault would be the first to acknowledge, biopower is material; it exists, even as a vast apparatus, in its exercise, and its exercise depends on and occurs at least in part as the deployment of the tools it has helped to develop since its own advent in the late nineteenth century.

We should not forget that biopower in all its glory emerged at just about the same time as the oil industry emerged in the US (at the end of the 1860s) and made enormous, leaping gains in momentum as the nation-states of the industrialized world converted to a petroleum economy based on ubiquitous petroleum-derived and dependent technologies. Basic techniques of normalization—for example, extensive record-keeping and surveillance—were possible without petroleum and natural gas (as Bentham's plan for the Panopticon demonstrates), but they were not possible on anything like the massive scale that they are with the inventive development and extensive use of petroleum products over the last one hundred and forty years.

On first glance one might think that much of modern technology—such as surveillance cameras or computers—are not petroleum products and do not use oil in their operation. We tend to think of electricity, largely generated world-wide by hydro-electric and coal power, as independent of the oil industry, but the fact is that it is not; most of the machinery in power plants that produce electricity from moving water and fuels other than petroleum and natural gas are built and transported, as well as maintained, with the aid of oil. Without oil, none of those technologies would be viable. And without plastics made from petroleum, we would have no cell phones, no laptops, no light-weight cameras, recording devices, or vehicles. Virtually all of the surveillance and record-keeping technology currently in use depends on the availability of oil. To realize the almost incredible degree to which our biopolitical world is dependent on petroleum, one only has to look

around the room in which one is sitting at any given moment and ask what would not be there if there were no petroleum-derived synthetic materials, no gasoline or diesel or jet fuel, and no petroleum-based lubricants or coolants. And what would happen if the oil from which those things and their replacements are made or transported were to stop flowing? What exercises of power would no longer be possible?

My suspicion is that without oil, biopower as a vast network of interlocking and overlapping practices would soon break down. One simply cannot manage entire populations of hundreds of thousands of people without satellites and micro-chips, and one cannot launch satellites or build micro-chips without oil. First, large interlocking networks would fragment into smaller normalizing units. Eventually, unable to profit from the large-scale reinforcement of a huge biopolitical network, even those smaller units might break down. The end of oil may well come in this century, perhaps even long before this century's end. Will that moment also bring the death of biopower?

My point is not that Todd May is wrong to suggest that Foucault's work is relevant today. On the contrary, I believe he is right. Foucault's work is relevant both as a model of and occasion for genealogical inquiry and as a description of much of our still very (in fact still increasingly) normalized, biopolitical present. My point is that resistance to normalizing biopower may be augmented, whether we like it or not, in the fairly near future by the rising cost and increasing scarcity of oil and the fact that any alternative viable on a comparable scale is a long way off. As normalizing practices become more difficult to effect, opportunities for resistance will become more frequent and varied—even as new dangers loom. If this description of the future is correct, the practice of genealogy now is all the more imperative. Those of us who would resist normalization need to understand how biopower articulates with the petroleum industry and technologies dependent upon it. We need a genealogy of petro-bio-power in order to understand the biggest difference between our present and Foucault's, which is that we stand at the beginning of the end of an economy and a culture predicated upon a single resource: crude oil. And if we are to understand our time, prepare for the new set of dangers upcoming, and take advantage of the opportunities for resistance and the practice of freedom that this volatile point in history affords, Todd May is, in my opinion, absolutely right: "We must become more Foucaultian rather than less." We must not merely study Foucault's genealogies; we must transform ourselves through the practice of genealogy as a spiritual exercise.