Viral Transmissions 1: Foucault avec Lacan
Archives of Quarantine and The Coming (Hysteric) Community

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1.

It probably does not come as a surprise that Foucault's name is attributed every now and then during these viral times. Almost everything seems to be popping up right out of his playbook: plague, quarantine, *self*-quarantine, policing, biopolitics, and a pandemic talking to us in the language of statistics; deploying charts and numbers as its generals; bringing up tests, peaks, flat curves, mortality rates, etc. as its new lexicon … all the while failing to reveal its grammar structure and asking us to learn the metrics ourselves. The new narcissism scale is here with us: internalize the COVID19 vulnerability curve, tell me where you are on it, and I will tell you who you are. (Are you your age, gender, underlying medical condition, or one of the anomalies?) Finally we can comfortably say that Foucault had prophesied wrongly; he did not foresee that 21st century would be his own! Two decades in, and just as we were getting ready for a new swing age with a potentially rebooted flapper fashion in our privileged existences in Global North, we are now instead stuck home in our pyjamas with the threat of a virus in a crown.

2.

Resting on that comfort, the present moment offers us two subject positions, possibly corresponding to two discourses: subject capable of self-governing (the subject in the discourse of the WHO, health officials, and epidemiology in general), and the subject capable of disciplining (herself and her entourage; the subject that the media and the communities (all virtual now) are striving to bring to life).

One reason why Foucault keeps emerging in reference to COVID19 is because he is one of the first to allude to the relationship between quarantine and plague. Not only in *Discipline and Punish* but also at least within two of his lectures in College de France (*Abnormal* and *Security, Territory, Population*) this relationship emerges as one of the more discernible beginnings of a new technique of power. Plague brings quarantine with it, and its regulations. While imposing the partitioning of urban space into a grid it also signals the emergence of disciplinary technologies. Plague regulations involve "when people can go out, how, at what times, what they can do at home, what type of food must they have" stretching all the way to "prohibiting certain types of contact, requiring them to present themselves to the inspectors, and open their homes to the inspectors" (STP 10).

Sounds familiar?

And yet, the major conundrum we are facing in this current pandemic is that it is not the health officials ushering these disciplinary technologies. All of what Foucault lists are what we ourselves are advising our friends, neighbours, and virtual communities to do. Consider the number of videos, clips, memes, infographs, charts, blog posts and etc. that IG, twitter, FB feeds, and the newspapers are bombarding us with: when and how to go out for grocery shopping; with what frequency; what to wear when we are outside; what to do with those clothes when we come home; how to unpack the shopping bags; how to clean them; where and how to store them; could we order take-out or not… To call these disciplinary might seem counterintuitive not least because the concept has bent so much towards its punitive connotations that its productive aspect is almost forgotten: discipline

makes bodies and shapes behaviour. It creates its own documents in the form of instructions and regulations. And in the archives of COVID19 it is highly unlikely that we will find booklets displaying orderly timetables and tasks: it will most probably come in a thousand digital shapes.

We can mull over whether or not this reorganization of tasks in turn forms a new grid-like structure within our homes, and speculate about the new squares and rectangles of domestic spaces. But when it comes to public health measures, neither the grid nor the capillary and granular control of everyday behaviour are in our purview. It is rather with the suppler logic of security that the governments and health officials are trying to keep the pandemic under control; by gearing the public health measures more towards controlling the circulation of people, goods, and the environment instead of imposing strict structures of behavior on everyday life. Even in cities where lockdowns are in effect, the logic within which these are implemented is security, and not discipline. It is about controlling the environment — but control as in Deleuze's control, which is William Burroughs's control, which is control that is not discipline but steering (in the sense of *conduire* in French), or as Foucault would say, *governing the milieu* of viral transmissions: closing parks for car traffic, proactive steps towards street reallocations, restrictions of the number of people within stores, the arrows showing us how to move within these places, marking the pavements with 6ft distances, and so on are interruptions of circulation, and depend on security as their underlying logic. What is interesting is that these measures do not dictate us what to do or how to behave in these newly organized public spaces. In other words, unlike discipline, the security measures are not producing bodies; they are creating loose guidelines for movement according to which we are expected to self-govern our behavior. What else does practicing "social distancing" mean, if not assessing the environment, considering whether or not we could keep 6ft distance, wearing a mask, and planning well in advance how our own circulation within the public space would look like, so that we out only after having taken all the precautionary measures that is needed to keep ourselves and others healthy and safe?

3.
Could we say that the emerging communities are also being shaped by a new form of *hysteric discourse* and present another opening to Lacan's four discourses as sketched out in Seminar XVII? In fact, if we are to take the cue from Patricia Gherovici, every new questioning of what we are and what we want is a hysteric opening. Isn't this global pandemic precisely when almost everyone is contemplating on those questions in one way or another in their newly outlined differentials of inequalities?

One of the fascinating twists Lacan makes in relation to the hysterics discourse is that he designates knowledge as its foundation, as the soil that sows and nourishes it. And like anything plated in soil, it makes do with whatever nutrients it finds ("*I don't seek, I find*", Seminar XIX). In that sense it is parallel to the minor knowledges of Deleuze, Guattari, and Stengers; or even Foucault's subjugated knowledges. Being aware that the old normal is long gone, obliterated into *pastness* (Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*), we are not just dangling in uncertainty waiting for a new normal to emerge. We are creating it with whatever bits of COVID19 information we could muster, building a community by spreading them to whoever is ready to receive and act on them. A coming community built with the whateverness of the COVID19 for sure; but a coming *hysteric* community, where hysteria is forming the social bond (Gherovici) as a response to social distancing, and where archives made within self-quarantine are redefining modes of behaviour and ways of relating to one another. As is the case with all beginnings none are rosy and/or romantic; as Foucault so elegantly puts in *Nietzsche,*

Genealogy, History they are grey, muddy, and murky: solidarity but also social policing, mutual aid but also survivalism.

And the symptom? (Once more) it is Gherovici who notes that the first case of hysteria Lacan encountered was a woman who developed an eccentric style of walking as she was unable to walk straight. Maybe that inability is repeated every time we are so clumsily trying to abide by social distancing on the street making weird zigzagging movements, curving our spines with the anxiety of accidentally touching others, and dropping our eyes to the pavement … all the while trying to fulfill the desires we believe are the desires of those who offer nothing but an empty shell of self-governing.