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What is a dispositif?*

Gilles Deleuze

Foucault's philosophy is often presented as an analysis of concrete social apparatuses [*dispositifs*]. But what is a *dispositif*? In the first instance it is a tangle, a multilinear ensemble. It is composed of lines, each having a different nature. And the lines in the apparatus do not outline or surround systems which are each homogeneous in their own right, object, subject, language, and so on, but follow directions, trace balances which are always off balance, now drawing together and then distancing themselves from one another. Each line is broken and subject to *changes in direction*, bifurcating and forked, and subject to *drifting*. Visible objects, affirmations which can be formulated, forces exercised and subjects in position are like vectors and tensors. Thus the three major aspects which Foucault successively distinguishes, Knowledge, Power and Subjectivity are by no means contours given once and for all, but series of variables which supplant one another. It is always in a crisis that Foucault discovers new dimensions, new lines. Great thinkers are somewhat seismic; they do not evolve but proceed by means of crisis, in fits and starts. Thinking in terms of moving lines was the process put forward by Herman Melville, and this involved fishing lines and lines of descent which could be dangerous, even fatal. Foucault talked of lines of sedimentation but also of lines of 'breakage' and of 'fracture'. Untangling these lines within a social apparatus is, in each case, like drawing up a map, doing cartography, surveying unknown landscapes, and this is what he calls 'working on the ground'. One has to position oneself on these lines themselves, these lines which do not just make up the social apparatus but run through it and pull at it, from North to South, from East to West, or diagonally.

The first two dimensions of a social apparatus [*dispositif*] – or those to which

* *Translator's note:* There is, in English, no straightforward way of translating *dispositif*, the implications of which are developed in this chapter. I have used the terms 'social apparatus' or 'apparatus' as the closest available equivalent.

Foucault draws our attention in the first instance – are curves of visibility and curves of enunciation. The apparatuses are like Raymond Roussel's machines, such as Foucault analyses them; they are machines which make one see and speak. Visibility cannot be traced back to a general source of light which could be said to fall upon pre-existing objects: it is made of lines of light which form variable shapes inseparable from the apparatus in question. Each apparatus has its way of structuring light, the way in which it falls, blurs and disperses, distributing the visible and the invisible, giving birth to objects which are dependent on it for their existence, and causing them to disappear. This is the case not only for painting but also for architecture: like the 'prison apparatus' as an optical machine, used for seeing without being seen. If apparatuses have a historical nature, this is to be found in regimes of light, but also in regimes of enunciation. Affirmations [*énoncés*] in turn can be traced back to lines of enunciation over which the differential positions of their elements are distributed; and, if the curves are themselves affirmations [*énoncés*], this is because *énoncés* are curves which distribute variables and because a science, at a given moment, or a literary genre, or a state of law, or a social movement, can be defined precisely by the regimes of enunciations to which they give rise. They are neither subjects nor objects, but regimes which must be defined from the point of view of the visible and from the point of view of that which can be enunciated, with the drifting, transformations and mutations which this will imply. And in every apparatus [*dispositif*] the lines break through thresholds, according to which they might have been seen as aesthetic, scientific, political, and so on.

Thirdly, a social apparatus [*dispositif*] consists of lines of force. It could be said that they proceed from one unique point to another in the preceding lines; in a way they 'rectify' the preceding curves, they draw tangents, fill in the space between one line and another, acting as go-betweens between seeing and saying and vice versa, acting as arrows which continually cross between words and things, constantly waging battle between them. The line of force comes about 'in any relationship between one point and another', and passes through every area in the apparatus. Though invisible and unsayable, it is closely knitted in with the others, yet separable. It is these lines that Foucault is interested in tracing, and he finds their trajectory in Roussel, Brisset, and in the painters Magritte and Rebeyrolle. This is the 'dimension of power', and power is the third dimension of space, internal to the apparatus, variable to the apparatus. It is formed, like power, out of knowledge [*savoir*].

Finally, Foucault discovered lines of subjectification. This new dimension has already given rise to misunderstandings, the reasons for which are hard to see in precise terms. More than anything else, the discovery of this new dimension arose out of a crisis in Foucault's thought, as if it had become necessary for him to redraw the map of social apparatuses [*dispositifs*], to find

for them a new orientation in order to stop them from becoming locked into unbreakable lines of force which would impose definitive contours. Leibniz gave exemplary expression to this state of crisis which sets thought on the move again when one thinks a resolution has been found: we thought we were in port, but we were cast back out into the open sea. Foucault, for his part, was concerned that the social apparatuses [*dispositifs*] which he was analysing should not be circumscribed by an enveloping line, unless other vectors could be seen as passing above or below it. Maybe he is using the term 'breaking the line' in the sense of 'bypassing it'. This bypassing of the line of forces is what happens when it turns on itself, meanders, grows obscure and goes underground – or rather when the force, instead of entering into a linear relationship with another force, turns back on itself, works on itself or affects itself. This dimension of the Self is by no means a pre-existing determination which one finds ready-made. Here again, a line of subjectification is a process, a production of subjectivity in a social apparatus [*dispositif*]: it has to be made, inasmuch as the apparatus allows it to come into being or makes it possible. It is a line of escape. It escapes preceding lines and escapes from itself. The Self is neither knowledge nor power. It is a process of individuation which bears on groups and on people, and is subtracted from the power relations which are established as constituting forms of knowledge [*savoirs*]: a sort of surplus-value. It is not certain that all social apparatuses [*dispositifs*] comprise these.

Foucault designates the Athenian city as the first place in which subjectification was invented: this is because it is, according to the original definition which he gives to it, the city which invented the line of forces which runs through the *rivalry of free men*. Now, from this line which makes it possible for one free man to command others, a very different one branches off which has it that a man who commands free men has to be seen as a master of himself. It is these optional rules of self-mastery which constitute subjectification, and this is autonomous, even if it is subsequently called upon to inspire new powers. One might wonder if these lines of subjectification do not form the extreme boundary of a social apparatus [*dispositif*], and if perhaps they sketch the movement of one apparatus to another, in this sense preparing for 'lines of fracture'. And lines of subjectification have no general formula, any more than the other lines. Though cruelly interrupted, Foucault's research would have shown that processes of subjectification could take on quite different forms from the Greek mode: for example in Christian social apparatuses [*dispositifs*] in modern societies, and so on. Can one not think of apparatuses where subjectification does not come about through aristocratic life or the aestheticised existence of the free man, but through the marginalised existence of the 'outsider'? Thus the Sinologist Tokei explains how the liberated slave somehow lost his social status and found himself thrown back on an isolated, lamenting, *elegiac* existence, out of which he was to shape new forms of power and knowledge. The

study of the variations in the process of subjectification seems to be one of the fundamental tasks which Foucault left to those who would follow him. I believe that there is great fecundity in this form of research, and that current projects concerning a history of private life only partially cover it. The creators of subjectivity can sometimes be the nobles, those who, according to Nietzsche, say 'we the good . . .', but in different conditions they are the excluded, the bad, the sinners, the hermits, or monastic communities, or heretics: a whole typology of subjective formations in a moving apparatus. And everywhere there are mix-ups to sort out: the productions of subjectivity escape from the powers and the forms of knowledge [*savoirs*] of one social apparatus [*dispositif*] in order to be reinserted in another, in forms which are yet to come into being.

These apparatuses, then, are composed of the following elements: lines of visibility and enunciation, lines of force, lines of subjectification, lines of splitting, breakage, fracture, all of which criss-cross and mingle together, some lines reproducing or giving rise to others, by means of variations or even changes in the way they are grouped. Two important consequences arise for a philosophy of social apparatuses [*dispositifs*]. The first of these is the repudiation of universals. The universal, in fact, explains nothing; it is the universal which needs to be explained. All the lines are lines of variation, which do not even have constant co-ordinates. The One, the All, the True, the object, the subject are not universals, but singular processes – of unification, totalisation, verification, objectivation, subjectification – present in the given apparatus. Also each apparatus is a multiplicity in which operate processes of this nature still in formation, distinct from those operating in another. It is in this sense that Foucault's philosophy can be referred to as pragmatism, functionalism, positivism, pluralism. Perhaps it is Reason which poses the greatest problem because the processes of rationalisation can operate on segments or on regions of all lines under consideration. Foucault pays homage to Nietzsche regarding the historical nature of reason; and he suggests the importance of epistemological research on the different forms of rationality in knowledge [*savoir*] (Koyré, Bachelard, Canguilhem) and of sociopolitical research into modes of rationality in power (Max Weber). Perhaps he was reserving the third line for himself: the study of types of 'reasonableness' in subjects he was dealing with. But what he essentially refuses is the identification of this process with Reason *par excellence*. He challenges any attempt to restore universals in reflection, communication or consensus. One might say in this respect that his relations with the Frankfurt School and the successors of this school were a series of misunderstandings for which he was not responsible. And, just as he does not admit of a universality in a founding subject or in Reason *par excellence* which would make it possible to judge social apparatuses [*dispositifs*], he also does not admit of universals of catastrophe in which reason becomes alienated and collapses once and for all. As Foucault said to Gérard Raulet, there is not a

bifurcation in reason, yet reason is forever bifurcating; there are as many bifurcations and branchings as there are foundations, as many collapses as there are constructions following the breaks brought about by the apparatus, and 'there is no sense in the propositions according to which reason is a long narrative which has now come to an end'. From this point of view, the question raised in objection to Foucault – the question as to how the relative value of a social apparatus [*dispositif*] can be assessed if one cannot evoke transcendental values by way of universal co-ordinates – is a question which leads us backwards and which, in itself, also risks meaninglessness. Does this mean that all social apparatuses [*dispositifs*] are equally valid (nihilism)? It has been a long while since thinkers like Spinoza and Nietzsche first began to show that modes of existence have to be assessed according to immanent criteria, according to their content of 'possibilities', liberty or creativity, without any appeal to transcendental values. Foucault even makes allusion to 'aesthetic' criteria, which are understood as criteria for life and replace on each occasion the claims of transcendental judgement with an immanent evaluation. When we read Foucault's last books, we have to do our best to understand the programme which he is placing in front of his readers. Could this be the intrinsic aesthetic of modes of existence as the ultimate dimension of social apparatuses [*dispositifs*]?

The second consequence of a philosophy of social apparatuses [*dispositifs*] is a change in orientation which turns one's interest away from the Eternal and towards the new. The new is not supposed to mean the same as the fashionable but, on the contrary, the variable creativity which arises out of social apparatuses [*dispositifs*]. This fits in with the question which began to be asked in the twentieth century as to how the production of something new in the world might be possible. It is true that, throughout his theory of enunciation, Foucault explicitly impugns the 'originality' of an *énoncé* as being something which is of little relevance and interest. All he wishes to consider is the 'regularity' of *énoncés*. But what he understands by regularity is the sweep of the curve which passes through singular points or the differential values of the ensemble of enunciations (in the same way that he defines power relations by means of the distribution of singular elements in a social field). When he challenges the originality of an *énoncé*, he means that a contradiction which might arise between two *énoncés* is not enough to distinguish between them, or to mark the newness of one with regard to the other. What counts is the newness of the regime itself in which the enunciation is made, given that such a regime is capable of containing contradictory *énoncés*. One might, for example, ask what regime of *énoncés* appeared with the social apparatus [*dispositif*] of the French Revolution, or the Bolshevik Revolution: it is the newness of the regime that counts, not the newness of the *énoncé*. Each apparatus is thus defined in terms of its newness content and its creativity content, this marking at the same time its ability to transform itself, or indeed

to break down in favour of a future apparatus, unless it concentrates its strength along its harder, more rigid, or more solid lines. Inasmuch as they escape the dimensions of power and knowledge, the lines of subjectification seem particularly capable of tracing paths of creation, which are continually aborting, but then restarting, in a modified way, until the former apparatus is broken. Foucault's as yet unpublished studies on various Christian processes probably open a number of different avenues in this respect. Yet it would not be right to think that the production of subjectivity is the territory only of religion: anti-religious struggles are also creative, just as regimes of light, enunciation and domination pass through different domains. Modern forms of subjectivation no longer resemble those of Greece any more than they do those of Christianity, and the same goes for their light, their enunciations and their forms of power.

We belong to social apparatuses [*dispositifs*] and act within them. The newness of an apparatus in relation to those which have gone before is what we call its actuality, our actuality. The new is the current. The current is not what we are but rather what we are in the process of becoming – that is the Other, our becoming-other. In each apparatus [*dispositif*] it is necessary to distinguish what we are (what we are already no longer), and what we are in the process of becoming: *the historical part and the current part*. History is the archive, the drawing of what we are and what we are ceasing to be, whilst the current is the sketch of what we are becoming. In the same way, history or the archive is what still separates us from ourselves, whilst the current is the Other with which we are already coinciding. It is sometimes thought that Foucault paints a picture of modern societies in terms of disciplinary social apparatuses [*dispositifs*], in opposition to older social apparatuses [*dispositifs*] in which sovereignty is the key concept. Yet this is by no means the case: the disciplines which Foucault describes are the history of what we gradually cease to be, and our present-day reality takes on the form of dispositions of overt and continuous *control* in a way which is very different from recent closed disciplines. Foucault agrees with Burroughs, who claims that our future will be controlled rather than disciplined. The question is not whether this is worse. For to ask this would be to make appeal to ways of producing subjectivity which would be capable of resisting this new form of domination, ways which would be very different from those which were formerly exercised against disciplines. Would this mean a new light, new enunciations, new power, new forms of subjectification? In each apparatus we have to untangle the lines of the recent past and those of the near future: that which belongs to the archive and that which belongs to the present; that which belongs to history and that which belongs to the process of becoming; *that which belongs to the analytic and that which belongs to the diagnostic*. If Foucault is a great philosopher, this is because he used history for the sake of something beyond it: as Nietzsche said: acting against time, and thus on time, for the sake

of a time one hopes will come. For what appears to be the present-day or the new according to Foucault is what Nietzsche called the unseasonable, the uncontemporary, the becoming which bifurcates with history, the diagnostic which relays analysis with other roads. This is not to predict but to be attentive to the unknown which knocks at the door. Nothing shows this better than a fundamental passage in *L'Archéologie du savoir*, which is valid for the rest of Foucault's work:

As such the analysis of the archive comprises a privileged region which is at the same time close to us, but different from our present; it is the border of the time which surrounds our present, jutting over it and describing it by means of its otherness; it is that which is outside us and delimits us. To describe the archive is to set out its possibilities (and the mastery of its possibilities) on the basis of forms of discourse which have just recently ceased to be our own; the threshold of its existence is established by the break which separates us from what we can no longer say, and from that which falls outside our discursive practices; it begins with what is outside our own language [*langage*], its locus being its distance from our own discursive practices. In this sense it becomes valid as a diagnostic for us. This is not because it makes it possible for us to paint a picture of our distinctive traits and to sketch in advance what we will look like in the future. But it deprives us of our continuities; it dissolves this temporal identity in which we like to look at ourselves in order to conjure with breaks in history; it breaks the thread of transcendental teleologies; and at the point where anthropological thought questions the being of man or his subjectivity, it vividly draws attention to the other, to the outside. Understood in this way, the diagnostic does not establish the facts of our identity by means of the interplay of distinctions. It establishes that we are difference, that our reason is the difference of forms of discourse, our history is the difference of times, that our selves are the difference of masks.

The different lines of an apparatus [*dispositif*] divide into two groups: lines of stratification or sedimentation, and lines leading to the present day or creativity. The last consequence of this method concerns the whole of Foucault's work. In most of his books he specifies a precise archive, with extremely new historical methods, regarding the General Hospital of the seventeenth century, the clinic of the eighteenth century, the prison of the nineteenth century, the subjectivity of Ancient Greece, and then Christianity. But that is one half of his task. For, through a concern for rigorousness, through a desire not to mix things up and through confidence in his reader, he does not formulate the other half. He formulates this explicitly only in the interviews which take place contemporary with the writing of each of his major books: what can be said nowadays about insanity, prison, sexuality? What new modes of subjectification can be seen to appear today which, indeed, are neither Greek nor Christian? This last question, notably, haunts Foucault till the end (we who are no longer either Greeks or Christians . . .). Right till the end of his life Foucault attached a lot

of importance to interviews, in France and even more so abroad, and this was not because he had a taste for them but because in them he was able to trace these lines leading to the present which required a different form of expression from the lines which were drawn together in his major books. These interviews are diagnostics. It is rather like the situation with Nietzsche, whose works are hard to read unless one sees them in the context of the *Nachlass* contemporary with each of them. The complete work of Foucault, such as Defert and Ewald conceive it to be, cannot separate off the books which have made such an impression on all of us from the interviews which lead us towards a future, towards a becoming: the underlying strata and the present day.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

Michel Karkelits noted that Gilles Deleuze did not use the word 'truth'. Where should one situate the notion of truth-telling which Foucault talks of in his last interviews? Is this an apparatus [*dispositif*] in itself? Or is it a dimension of all apparatuses?

Gilles Deleuze replied that for Foucault the true has no universal nature. The truth designates the ensemble of the productions which come about inside an apparatus [*dispositif*]. An apparatus comprises truths of enunciation, truths of light and visibility, truths of power, truths of subjectivation. Truth is the actualisation of the lines which constitute an apparatus. To extract from the ensemble of apparatuses [*dispositifs*] a desire for truth which could move from one to the other as something constant would be without meaning in Foucault's work.

Manfred Frank observed that Foucault's philosophy belongs to a post-Hegelian and post-Marxist tradition which wished to break with the universal in Enlightenment thought. None the less, one finds in Foucault all kinds of universals: apparatuses [*dispositifs*], discourses, archives, and so on, which prove that the break with the universal is not a radical one. Instead of one universal, there are several, on different levels.

Gilles Deleuze stressed that the true frontier is between constants and variables. The critique of universals can be translated into a question: how is it possible that anything new might come into the world? Other philosophers, like Whitehead and Bergson, made this the fundamental question in modern philosophy. It matters little if general terms are used in order to reflect on apparatuses [*dispositifs*]: they are names given to variables. All constants are done away with. The lines which make up the apparatuses demonstrate continuous variations. There are no more universals – that is to say, there is nothing except lines of variation. The general terms are the co-ordinates which have no meaning other than to make possible the estimation of a continuous variation.

Raymond Bellour wondered where it would be appropriate to situate

Foucault's texts on the subject of art: on the side of the book, and therefore of the archive, or on the side of the interviews, and therefore of the current.

Gilles Deleuze recalled Foucault's plan to write a book on Manet. In this book, Foucault would probably have analysed more than the lines and the colours, the way Manet structured light. This book would have belonged to the side of the archive. The interviews would have redeemed from the archive the lines characterising our present.

Foucault might well have said: Manet is the painter who ceases to be. This does not detract from Manet's greatness. For the greatness of Manet consists in what it was to become Manet at the moment he painted. These interviews would have consisted in showing the lines of breakage and of fracture which have led to artists nowadays entering into regimes of light which can be said to be different – that is to say, light has a different form of becoming.

For the arts, too, there is a complementarity in the two aspects of the analytic (that which we are, and by dint of this what we are ceasing to be) and the diagnostic (the becoming other to which we are heading). The analytic of Manet implies a diagnostic of what becomes of light, starting with Manet and following on from him.

Walter Seliter was surprised at the 'physicalism' which ran through Gilles Deleuze's presentation.

Gilles Deleuze did not accept the expression to the extent that it implied that in regimes of light there might be such a thing as a raw light which could be stated in physical terms. The physical is the threshold of that which is visible and that which can be stated. There is nothing given in an apparatus which can be taken to be in some kind of raw state. But light does have a physical regime – lines of light, waves and vibrations: why not?

Fati Triki wondered how and where the demolition of modern techniques of servitude could be introduced into the concept of social apparatuses [*dispositifs*]. Where could the practices of Michel Foucault be situated?

Gilles Deleuze indicated that there was no general reply. If a diagnostic was to be found in Foucault, it was in the need to locate, for each apparatus, lines of breakage and fracture. Sometimes these were situated on the level of powers; at other times on the level of knowledges [*savoirs*]. More generally, it should be said that the lines of subjectivation indicate fissures and fractures. But one is dealing with a form of casuistry. Evaluations must be made according to the case, according to the content of the apparatus. To give a general reply would be to undermine a discipline which is as important as that of archaeology, the discipline of the diagnostic.

Fati Triki wondered if Foucault's philosophy could succeed in breaking down the barriers of the Western world. Could it be seen as a philosophy *extra muros*?

Gilles Deleuze replied that for a long time Foucault limited his method to short sequences in French history. But in his latter books he envisaged longer sequences, starting with the Greeks. Could the same extension be made geographically? Could methods analogous to those of Foucault be

used to study oriental social apparatuses [*dispositifs*] or those of the Middle East? Certainly so, since Foucault's language [*langage*], which sees things in terms of parcels of lines, as entanglements, as multilinear ensembles, does have an oriental feel to it.