Power, Right, Truth: 
Michel Foucault’s Conservative Discourse

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07/08/09
1. **Introduction: Michel Foucault: a not so “Young Conservative”**

In a 1981 lecture titled *Modernity versus Postmodernity*, Jürgen Habermas famously accused Michel Foucault of being a “young conservative.” The charge was meant to place Foucault, along with intellectuals such as Bataille and Derrida, within a postmodern tradition which rejected notions of scientific and moral progress stemming from the Enlightenment. Habermas portrayed these thinkers as preferring subjective propositions of aesthetic taste rather than objective rational thought. They were afforded the luxury of denying objectivity because their intellectual status rendered them “emancipated from the imperatives of work and usefulness”¹ and therefore out of touch with the realities of daily life. In their preference for fanciful thinking over the concrete experiences of the real world, Habermas understood Foucault and his postmodern contemporaries as also disregarding the real intelligible structures which conditioned those experiences—an intelligibility which could possibility lead to changing society for the better.

Habermas has not been alone in placing Foucault under a postmodern label, nor in his opinion towards postmodernism’s conservative implications. Terry Eagleton similarly argued that Foucault and his postmodern contemporaries were “a kind of extended footnote to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, who anticipated almost every one of [their] positions in nineteenth century Europe.”² Eagleton loosely portrayed postmodernism as a movement which

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denoted the end of “those grand narratives of truth, reason, science, progress and universal
emancipation which are taken to characterize modern thought from the Enlightenment onwards.”\(^3\) In rejecting the grand narrative, Foucault promoted a more scattered view of history in which the hopes of the Enlightenment would eventually dissipate amidst an inability to adequately account for progress. While Eagleton acknowledged that, for Foucault, a truly radical politics could only form without the grand narrative, he worried that in taking this step postmodern thought aligned itself with a conservatism that similarly despised of objective rational inquiry. Eagleton thought the rejection of a rational and objective truth could easily lead to a defense of the status-quo. To a degree, Eagleton has been proven right: the denial of objective truth has actually found support in some conservative circles.\(^4\)

While Habermas and Eagleton’s critiques lead to some misinterpretations of Foucault’s position,\(^5\) what brings these two assessments together is the similar accusation that Foucault thwarts possibilities of positive change. Both Habermas and Eagleton trust in social science and


\(^4\) For example see Nathan Glazer, *Affirmative Discrimination: Ethnic Inequality and Public Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), p. 13. In arguing against affirmative action, Glazer traces a history of racism that underestimated exclusionary practices claiming: “There is no Supreme Historian, sitting in heaven, who totes up the record and tell us which way the balance of history ran. One picks out a dominant theme, on the basis of one’s experience as well as one’s knowledge, and our choice is made, in part, on the basis of our hopes for the future as well as our experience.” One can see the reaction against objective knowledge and grand narrative as being used to justify conservative social policy.

\(^5\) See Nancy Fraser, “Michel Foucault: A ‘Young Conservative’?” *Ethics*, No. 96 (1985), pp. 165-184. Fraser comments that Habermas oversimplifies Foucault’s position by tying his criticism to the Enlightenment when his real target is “Humanism.” The same critique could be applied to Eagleton.
its ability to intelligibly understand society. Additionally, they both see this intelligibility as opening up positive possibilities for changing society through consensus and political action. Paul Rabinow, a UC Berkeley professor who conducted a number of interviews with Foucault, alludes to their critique in this way: “Foucault has been cast a conservative by some, in the sense that he has consistently opposed much of French Marxism, ‘existing socialism’, and those utopias and nightmares associated with this tradition.” Foucault’s attack on Marxism has cast him as an opponent of progress to thinkers, such as Habermas and Eagleton, who associate with this tradition. Rabinow, however, goes on to say that despite this critique “such labels tell us little.” To the extent that conservatism remains a label of accusation, Rainbow is quite right to discount it.

By why all the fuss? Why does it matter if Foucault is considered a conservative by some? The claim is quite controversial in light of the fact that Foucault has been a leading intellectual figure behind many causes of the Left. His ideas have influenced a generation of academics developing new areas of critical study, from biopolitics to queer theory and post-colonial studies. These disciplines have attempted to challenge the rarely questioned and often exclusionary norms of society as well as sought to uncover the uses and abuses of new forms of governmental power in our contemporary moment. Foucault’s philosophy has placed an impetus on its followers to be highly critical and resolutely uncompromising in a quest to resist various forms of domination which exist throughout society.

Despite his Leftist orientation, there still is good reason to tie Foucault to conservatism. In turn, I have attempted to move beyond the caricature portrayal of Foucault-as-a-conservative

by finding a more concrete connection between the two. In this paper, I argue that Foucault and conservative theorists share a similar world-view in their interpretation of political society. More specifically, Foucault and conservative thinkers come to this commonality in their interpretation of three socio-political concepts—the concepts of “power, right and truth.” I demonstrate this connection by juxtaposing two interpretations of these concepts—one of which Foucault and conservatives both reject and one which they both embrace. The first interpretation—the one which they both reject—analyzes political society around laws, origins and through rational inquiry. Foucault referred to this explanation as the “philosophico-juridical discourse.” The second interpretation—the one which they both accept—analyzes political society around customs, continuity and through historical investigation. Foucault referred to this explanation as the “historico-political discourse.” In turn, each discourse portrays the concepts of “power, right and truth” in drastically different ways. First, while the former understands power as repressive and juridical, the latter comprehends power as productive and unacquirable. Second, while the former perceives rights as depending on origins and universality, the latter identifies rights as depending on continuity and locality. Finally, while the former defines truth in terms of philosophical inquiry, the latter defines truth as historically connected to conflict and war. It is in these latter interpretations that Foucault and conservatism find their connection.

In addition to the scope of my argument, I have limited my analysis to two additional specifications. First, in terms of defining conservatism, I have left the “young conservative” label behind and instead reached back to the origins of modern conservatism’s birth with Edmund

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8 Michel Foucault, “Society Must Be Defended,” p. 49.
Burke and Joseph De Maistre as my representative conservative figures. In this regard, I have looked at Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and Maistre’s *Reflections on France* as the primary sources for establishing their world-view. While Burke and Maistre often seem like very different thinkers—the latter with a much darker vision than the former—they none-the-less share a common perspective which demonstrates a dominant theme in conservatism’s interpretation of society.

Second, I have attempted to limit my analysis of Foucault to his middle genealogical works. Foucault used his method of genealogy to historically and empirically investigate the ways in which various social and political phenomena had been formed. The books which Foucault wrote at this time, *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (1976), were therefore the most relevant in informing my interpretation of his views regarding the makeup of political society. In addition, I have supplemented these two works with Foucault’s 1975-76 *Society Must Be Defended* lectures at the College de France. In fact, it is from these very lectures that Foucault first mentioned the concepts of “power, right and truth” as well as the philosophico-juridical and historico-political interpretations of these concepts.

In light of these reservations, one might still be bothered by the fact that Foucault, Burke and Maistre seemingly have no directly visible connection. After all what would a twentieth century historian who commented on such topics as madness and sexuality have to do with two

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9 At some points, I supplement these texts with Burke’s treatise on aesthetics and some of Maistre’s dialogues.

10 These lectures are important in situating Foucault’s two main genealogical works because, in giving these lectures, Foucault elucidated and clarified many of his ideas in this period. See Introduction in “*Society Must Be Defended,*” and, Stuart Elden, “The war of races and the constitution of the state: Foucault's 'faute défendre la société' and the politics of calculation.” *Boundary,* No 29, (2002), p. 125.
aristocratic politicians from the eighteenth century? In this regard, one can turn to an important moment in Western history which captured the world-view that each theorist opposed: the French Revolution.

2. The “Philosophico-Juridical Discourse” and the Critique of the French Revolution

The French Revolution was an event of monumental importance for Foucault, Burke and Maistre. Both Burke and Maistre’s most important written works were formulated in direct opposition to the Revolution, demarcating the event as one of the most important of their time. The revolutionary challenges against French civil society brought to consciousness certain aspects of the monarchal regime that they both deeply cherished. Burke saw the challenges of the Revolution as representing a “new conquering empire of light and reason”\(^{11}\) while Maistre saw the revolutionary cause as embodying “sophisms of private interest, vanity [and] cowardice.”\(^{12}\) Both thinkers found thrust upon themselves a moral impetus to defend a quickly dissipating society founded on respect for tradition, hierarchy and prejudice. Foucault, on the other hand, has been thought of less as a reactionary of the French Revolution. Despite this fact, many of Foucault’s genealogical inquiries attributed great importance to the event. In *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, Foucault established a relationship between the French Revolution, the discourses justifying French penal reform and the newly proliferating

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scientifico-medical discourses surrounding the concept of sexuality. In fact, Foucault referenced the French Revolution several times throughout each of these two works. This incessant preoccupation with the Revolution, though, was not meant as an allusion of praise. Like Burke and Maistre, instead of a viewing the Revolution as an agent of Enlightenment advancement, Foucault became quite weary of the misleading words of “progress” and “humanity” that were to cloak the terrible forms of domination lurking in the midst of this momentous event.

Foucault, Burke and Maistre located the Revolution’s dominative tendencies in the normalizing rationality which motivated its followers—a rationality that argued for a government’s legitimacy based on its respect for the “rights of men.”13 The “rights of men” represented a normalizing rationality in so far that they posited general fundamental rules (i.e. norms) which underpinned legitimate government and could never be violated. More specifically, Foucault, Burke and Maistre portrayed the revolutionary theorists as arriving at these universal norms through investigating a specific question regarding the interrelation of three important socio-political terms—power, right and truth: “How does the discourse of truth or, quite simply, philosophy—in the sense that philosophy is the discourse of truth par excellence—establish the limits of power's right?”14 Through rational inquiry, the revolutionary theorists thought that they could discover an objective and universal truth that would dictate a government’s ability to legitimately wield power. The line of legitimate power was considered power’s right and “the essential role of the theory of right [was to] establish the legitimacy of

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power.”15 In the revolutionary case, power’s right was seen as dependent on respecting the natural rights that men held before entering into civil society (such as the various rights that were to be declared in the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen). Once these natural rights were accepted as the universal foundation of legitimate government, society could set up a system of laws that guided power in protecting and respecting these rights.

Foucault placed this explanation of power, right and truth by the revolutionary theorists under what he called the “philosophico-juridical discourse”—a discourse that surrounded its analysis of political society around laws, origins and rational inquiry. Foucault was sensitive to the breadth of thinkers—thinkers ranging from Hobbes to Hegel—who attempted to define the limits of power with a similar method and scope. However, he specifically found strong signs of the philosophico-juridical discourse “in the work of Rousseau and his contemporaries” and thus equated it with the French Revolution. Foucault thought that Rousseau used the philosophico-juridical perspective “to construct an alternative model to authoritarian or absolute monarchical administration—that of the parliamentary democracies.” This perspective found increasing popularity up “until the time of the [French] Revolution” 16 and actually motivated many French citizens to partake in the Revolution.

While Burke and Maistre never referred to a philosophico-juridical discourse in the way that Foucault coined it, their critiques against the French Revolution were also directed against its interpretation of power, right and truth. According to both Burke and Maistre, the revolutionaries claimed for themselves the “rights of men” to justify their crusade against the


16 Michel Foucault, “Society Must Be Defended,” p. 35.
monarchy. Burke referred to this perspective of right as dependent on a vision of rationality which he referred to as “abstract metaphysics”; it sought to discover the legitimacy of government by through inferring the nature of man at his origin from certain rational principles. Maistre similarly thought that these universal right arguments stemmed from a decadent and abstract rationality. In addition, they both saw the Revolution as an attempt to reconstruct society—to reformulate the functions of power behind a so-called new and improved system of laws.

Burke despised this reconstructive project because he thought that its promotion of general norms, vis-à-vis natural right claims, oversimplified the real complexity that man’s nature acquired upon entering political society and therefore the real complexity of political society in general:

“These metaphysic rights entering into common life, like rays of light which pierce into a dense medium, are, by the laws of nature, refracted from their straight line. Indeed in the gross and complicated mass of human passions and concerns, the primitive rights of men undergo such a variety of refractions and reflections, that is becomes absurd to talk of them as if they continued in the simplicity of their original direction. The nature of man is intricate; the objects of society are of the greatest possible complexity; and therefore no simple disposition or direction of power can be suitable either to man’s nature or to the quality of his affairs.”17

Burke held that even if the revolutionary claim to natural rights proved theoretically correct, it did not imply that these claims were to dictate the legitimacy of government. The original state of man, if one could even discover such a point, had been long lost through a number of complex changes that took place in society. Burke thought that the biggest mistake of the Revolution was that this abstract “right of the people [was] almost always sophistically confounded with their power.”\textsuperscript{18} Power could not derive its legitimacy from an abstract norm. Since men and societies developed in diverse and complex ways, a power which garnered its right from a general norm could not adequately deal with specific, complex political situations.

Burke concluded that the general norms of the French Revolution and its arguments for “the rights of men” represented a form of destructive domination. In Burke’s view, the norms and codes around which the revolutionaries attempted to organize society were uncompromising and therefore represented a form of “violent tyranny.” Against their rights of men “there [could] be no prescription; against these no agreement [was] binding; these admit[ed] no temperament, and no compromise.”\textsuperscript{19} The revolutionaries attempted to take any means possible to “liberate” society from the so-called repressive institutions which impeded their simplistic understanding of human nature. Furthermore, Burke thought their arguments violently turned against the concrete laws and customs that properly held society together. The revolutionaries “despise[d] experience as the wisdom of unlettered men” and had “wrought under-ground a mine that [would] blow up at one grand explosion all examples of antiquity, all precedents, charts and acts of parliaments.”

Trying to reconstruct society around an abstract norm, around natural rights, would violently

\textsuperscript{18} Burke, \textit{Reflections on the Revolution in France}, p. 221.

\textsuperscript{19} Burke, \textit{Reflections on the Revolution in France}, p. 217.
disrupt the stable systems that kept order in society. In light of these destructive ends, Burke quite simply viewed the revolutionary appeal to the name of “humanity [as] savage and brutal.”

Though quite the fan of brutality and violence, Joseph de Maistre was similarly horrified by the normalizing rationality embodied in natural right claims. In a slightly different way to Burke, Maistre reacted against these rational norms because he saw their creation as an attempt to domesticate the glorious rule of limitless power. He pointed to this horror when discussing the new French constitution that was born out of the Revolution. In Maistre’s view, the revolutionaries attempted to codify every claim of right in its new constitution. Maistre thought that this led the constitution to become a messy and “enormous machine… a multiplicity of springs and clockwork… of pieces clanging away.” Rather than relying on legislators who codified norms into the law, Maistre thought that a good government would “act on instinct and impulse more than on reasoning” for there was “no other means of acting than [with] a certain moral force that bends men’s wills like grain before the wind.” The norms of the new constitution stifled a sovereign’s ability to keep order in the way he saw fit; the norms domesticated power and forced it to follow procedures instead of impulsively acting on its own violent accord.

In these terms Maistre saw the revolutionary rationality as only causing destruction and violence. Like Burke, Maistre attacked the rationality of the revolution for its simplicity. Through their incessant emphasis on Reason, the Revolution’s “reasoning [had] banished

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21 Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, pp. 50, 56.

22 Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, p. 52.
"reason"—the reason embodied in a respect for authoritative power. It was only this power that could keep society together. Thus with its disposal, Maistre concluded that “sovereignty did not exist in France” for “everything [was] artificial and violent.” Despite the fact that that Maistre often praised this violence as a necessary step in the plans of Providence, he decried the source of this violence and the end to which it led. Instead of a source of brute strength ordering society towards the end of hierarchy and obedience, the revolutionary violence stemmed from Reason and hoped for equality.

Foucault similarly agreed to the horrific outcome that would result from the Revolution’s rationality. Like Burke and Maistre, Foucault believed that the natural right claims of the revolutionaries led to this horrific outcome. Foucault’s critique, however, relied on a more comprehensive reflection of the changes beginning with the French Revolution and continuing on throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. With his greater historical vision, Foucault argued that the reference to “nature” in natural rights demonstrated that “life more than law” was to become the focus of political struggles from the Revolution and onward, even despite the fact that rights implied a relation to law. With the declaration of natural rights, Foucault held that “for the first time in history, no doubt, biological existence was reflected in political existence... and what might be called a society’s “threshold of modernity” [had] been reached when the life of

23 Joseph de Maistre, Considerations on France, p. 76.
24 Joseph de Maistre, Considerations on France, p. 57.
25 See Joseph de Maistre, Considerations on France, p. 20. In Maistre’s view, violence is dealt in order to make space for creation: “If Providence erases it is no doubt in order to write.” It interesting to note the similarity of this viewpoint with Foucault’s ethics: criticism is necessary in order for a subject to recreate himself.
the species [was] wagered on its own political strategies.”27 The fundamental distinction that existed since Aristotle—the distinction between Zoë—bare life—and Bios—the good life/political life—had come to an end. No longer would there be a sovereign who would simply protect or punish “legal subjects,” rather now existed governments who would look at its citizens as “living beings.”28 Therefore, while the old sovereign power functioned in reference to the sword—when the law was broken it would retaliate with the brute force of death—natural rights demanded that governments should respect life. This intrusion of the political sphere onto the sphere of life formed a new governmental strategy of biopower—to govern, rationally administer and, most importantly, protect life.

Foucault found that this newly formed biopower was strongly connected to the concept of the norm. While judging healthy or normal life was not of the Revolution’s original intention, its universal claims helped introduce a form of reason that used norms to govern. The connection between universal right and natural right—norm and life—proved to be a very efficient category for the newly formed biopower to function through; since biopower was focused on protecting life, it logic demanded a distinction between the normal life that it would protect and the abnormal life that it would dispose of as a threat to society. In a similar way to Burke and Maistre, Foucault believed that the normalizing rationality of the Revolution would not allow for a complex understanding of political man; rather, citizens were judged in the simplistic binary of normal versus abnormal. Thus, it is no surprise that Foucault specifically claimed that “all the Constitutions framed throughout the world since the French Revolution, the Codes written and

27 Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1, pp. 142-43.
revised, a whole continual and clamorous legislative activity: these were the forms that made an essentially normalizing power acceptable."²⁹

In light of the emergence of normalizing rationality, Foucault argued that one could trace the most destructive events of the past two centuries to the French Revolution. Foucault argued that the individual scope of biopower eventually expanded into a biopolitical focus regarding the normalcy of populations. Under this biopolitical transcription, governments were given the power to evaluate the normalcy of entire populations and destroy those who were deemed a threat to the protection of normal life. These dreary results stemmed from the specific combination of exclusionary norms and a biopolitical focus on life. Foucault even implied that most of the mass genocides of our past century were specifically brought about by the French Revolution—with the domino effect that the popularity of the “rights of men” generated throughout the world. After all, this was precisely one of the big questions that Foucault attempted to answer throughout his writings: why is it that “wars were never as bloody as they have been since the nineteenth century, and of all things being equal, never before did regimes visit such holocausts on their populations?”³⁰ His answer to this question relied on the emergence of the norm and the focus on life that the Revolution produced; only then could “entire populations [be] mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres [had] become vital”³¹ to protect society.

Even though Foucault’s reference to biopolitics was absent in Burke or Maistre’s

²⁹ Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1, p. 144.
³⁰ Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1, p. 137.
³¹ Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1, p. 137.
writings, their common agreement on the dangers of normalizing rationality signaled the most important part of their critique. Foucault’s emphasis on the dangers of biopolitics should be seen as an additional point that makes the general critique of normalcy even more deadly. Therefore, whether or not one necessarily agrees with their portrayals, Foucault, Burke and Maistre come closer together in their rejection of the philosophical project associated with the Revolution. This commonality, however, does not necessarily draw Foucault and these conservative thinkers in any affirmative relationship. The question that can bring us closer to this understanding involves investigating the next step taken by Foucault, Burke and Maistre after disposing of the philosophico-juridical discourse. After all, their critical stance against the Revolution and its rationality opened up new possibilities for defining the legitimacy of political society. In turn, it is precisely in this new interpretation that Foucault, Burke and Maistre come together under a single conservative world-view.

3. The “Historico-Political Discourse” Part 1: Power and Right

In direct relation to the dangers of the philosophico-juridical discourse, Foucault presented and embraced the “historico-political discourse” as a more realistic alternative for

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32 To be clear, Foucault was not merely describing the ‘historico-political discourse” but actually embracing it as his viewpoint. There are two points where Foucault demonstrates this alignment: First, Foucault equated the historico-political discourse with what he called a “discourse of race war.” In clarifying his relationship to this discourse, Foucault commented that he was trying to “trace the history of racist discourse [but also wanted to] praise it.” Second, Foucault praised the historico-political discourse when equating it with political historicism amidst a discussion of Thomas Hobbes. Ending his lecture, he commented, “Well, next time I would like to both trace the
understanding society. Instead of founding the legitimacy of government around philosophical inquiry, the historico-political discourse promoted historical investigations to interpret political society. With his new founded historical focus, Foucault could refuse “to extend his faith in metaphysics” and come to discover that “there [was] ‘something altogether’ different behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms.”33 One such essential “form” was that of the universal subject; thus Foucault famously announced the death of man.

With this death, Foucault reoriented the relationship that power and right were to take in relation to the individual subject—a relationship that Burke and Maistre hinted to almost two centuries earlier. Instead of depicting a universal philosopher who would precede and determine the limits of power and right, each theorist switched the origin of determination and claimed that power and right would precede and create the makeup of the individual subject. How so? First, unlike the philosophico-juridical theorists who understood power as resting in the hands of a sovereign (whether this sovereign took the form of a king or the people), Foucault, Burke and Maistre believed that power exceeded the grasps of any individual subject. Power was a substance that could neither be acquired nor tamed by man. Second, unlike the philosophico-juridical theorists who considered power as a substance which, without any limitations, often repressed one’s natural rights, Foucault, Burke and Maistre argued that precisely through power, specifically through its productive and creative capacities, did subjects come to understand

history of this discourse of political historicism and praise it.” See Michel Foucault, “Society Must Be Defended”, pp. 64 and 111.

themselves and their identities.

In turn, this framework of power also pushed each theorist to argue for a localized conception of right. While the universal philosopher discovered the “rights of men”, Burke and Maistre argued for an understanding of right within the context of local custom. Using his own unique language, Foucault made a similar point. He argued that one should never try and escape power, but rather “negotiate” and “resist” power from within a local context. By this, Foucault meant to emphasize that any critical claim had to be understood in light of the local discourses and practices of a particular society. In this sense, the universal claims of the revolutionaries were proven fictitious. With an inability to escape locality, where could one anchor a universal right to revolution?

Although without a right to revolution, Foucault’s philosophy has often been coined as uniquely thoughtful work of revolutionary proportions. Many have seen Foucault as opening up the path to a new way of thinking about the historical development of society. Probably one of the most important perspectives that Foucault brought to the intellectual table has been his work on power, specifically his point that power functions without an agent. Foucault explicitly declared this point in *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*:

“There is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives. But this does not mean that it results from the choice or decision of an individual subject; let us not look for the headquarters that preside over its rationality…. The logic [of power] is perfectly clear, the aims decipherable, and yet it is often the case that no one is there to have invented them, and few can be said to have formulated them: an implicit characteristic of the great
For Foucault, one could not trace power to a central location. Rather, power functioned in a way which made it seem as if it came out of nowhere—out of the hands of the invisible, the “great anonymous.” Foucault thought this true because he viewed power more as a relation of forces than an actual substance. A relation of forces implied that power intersected through multiple areas; thus by existing in multiple areas, power could not be held. In viewing power without an agent, Foucault declared that previous analyses of power could “finally escape the system of Law-and-Sovereign which has captivated political thought for such a long time.” It could finally escape a system of thought which understood power as a substance capable of control.

Foucault interpretation, however, proved to be not so unique; Maistre made this point regarding power almost two hundred years earlier, specifically, when discussing his views on the role and function of punishment. While one could think that the sovereign actually dealt out punishment, Maistre clarified that the King did not actually hold the right of punishment and that “this formidable prerogative… led to the necessary existence of a man destined to administer the punishments.” This man was the executioner—the one through which power and punishment were actually expressed. In focusing on the executioner, Maistre located power out of the hands of the sovereign and within the axe of the executioner. He located power at the point of its expression and denied its ability to be acquired. Maistre did quite literally what Foucault claimed

34 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1*, 95.

35 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1*, 97.

contemporary political theory still had to do in order to better understand power—“to cut off the
king’s head.”37

But what of the executioner? Couldn’t the executioner be seen as the new holder of
power, as a miniature sovereign individual? The reason why this could hardly be the case was
dependent on the specific ways in which Maistre understood the executioner. For Maistre, “this
man [was], in effect, found everywhere, without there being any means of explaining how.” The
executioner was not a specific holder of power, a subject controlling power, but rather a locator
of power; power passed through him in an inexplicable kind of way. Even though the
executioner looked like other humans, Maistre denied any sense of autonomy to his being. The
proof of this was that man could neither praise his actions nor look down upon them. No
denunciation and “no moral praise seem[ed] appropriate for him, since this suppose[d] a
relationship with human beings, and he [had] none.”38 In this respect, power passed through him
without the ability to mark him as responsible; one could only locate power through the acts of
punishment. The executioner was the “great anonymous” of Foucault.

And if there was to be any doubt on this specific point, Maistre reiterated his perspective
that power acted without an agent by further replacing the executioner as an administrator of
punishment with “punishment” itself. Maistre ended his dialogue by stressing that evil must
“constantly be repressed by punishment”; there is no sovereign nor an executioner, but rather
punishment as a force that deals punishment. This ending mimicked that which directly preceded
the mention of the sovereign in the opening of the dialogue: “Punishment is an active ruler; he is

38 Joseph de Maistre, St. Petersburg Dialogues, p. 19.
the true manager of public affairs; he is the dispenser of laws; and wise men call him the sponsor of all the four orders for the discharge of their several duties. Punishment governs all mankind; punishment alone preserves them; punishment wakes, while their guards are asleep; the wise consider punishments the perfection of justice.”  

39 Maistre preceded and exceeded his discussion of the sovereign and the executioner with punishment itself as a dealer of punishment. Introducing and concluding his dialogue in this way leaves one with a view of punishment as an impersonal force.

In a similar way to Foucault and Maistre, Burke rejected a centralized notion of power through his formulation of the social contract theory. Burke took up the idea of the social contract but drastically altered its logic in order to attack the understanding of democratic sovereignty in the work of such thinkers as Jean Jacques Rousseau. For Rousseau, the social contract was the precise way in which a citizen could give consent to a legislator to enact policies that matched the “general will” of the people. In relation to this argument, Burke agreed that “society [was] indeed a contract” but in a drastically different way. What differentiated Burke’s contract from Rousseau’s was that the latter only took into account living citizens in its formulation. Burke, in contrast, historicized his social contract in order to make it function through multiple generations. The social contract therefore became “a partnership not only between those who [were] living, but between those who [were] living, those who are dead and those who [were] yet to be born.” In doing this, Burke took power away from the hands of the sovereign and his subjects. There was not a specific point in time in which a transaction took place, in which power was given over from the hands of the subjects to the sovereign. Power was

39 Joseph de Maistre, St. Petersburg Dialogues, p. 18.
dispersed through time, through multiple generations, and outside the hands of any one individual. It was a unique type of contract which could never be broken, unlike “subordinate contracts for objects of mere occasional interest [which could] be dissolved at pleasure.”

This common insistence of an impersonal power also led Foucault, Burke and Maistre to make a more radical point regarding the relationship between subjects and power. Not only did they argue that power functioned without a subject, but, on the contrary, power also produced subjects. Not only was man unable to tame or acquire power, but power controlled and tamed man.; it determined the very categories through which subjects could understand themselves as well as the categories through which their consciousnesses were to be shaped.

Foucault demonstrated how power helped produce subjects through pointing to the modern concept of “sexuality.” For Foucault, the modern concept of sexuality was formed throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. Before this time, sex was seen more of an act of necessity that an actual form of identity. Through the formation of sexuality, individuals began to identify themselves as sexual subjects. The source of these categories, however, stemmed not from the subjects themselves, but from various scientifico-medical institutions which attempted to categorize human behavior. These institutions, therefore, produced the very knowledge of sexuality through which individuals could come to view themselves. To further demonstrate this point, Foucault thought that his notion of productive power could be contrasted with an understanding of power as a purely repressive force which dealt out prohibitions. Foucault portrayed other thinkers of sexuality, such as Freud, as implying that sexuality was an essential attribute to man which was often repressed due to societal pressures. Foucault, however, starkly

rejected this view: “sexuality is far more a positive product of power than power was ever repression of sexuality.”\textsuperscript{41} The knowledge of sexuality had to be created before one could even begin to talk about prohibition to its access.

Foucault, however, did not limit his analysis of productive power to the concept of sexuality. Sexuality rather served as one such example which helped him answer a question that originally lead to his thesis of productive power: “If power were never anything but repression, if it never did anything to say no, do you really think one would brought to obey it?” Foucault thought that the proof of power’s productivity was that a prohibitive view of power could not account for obedience to power. “What makes power hold good what makes it accepted is imply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces thing, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge and produces discourse.”\textsuperscript{42} In addition to the discourse of sexuality, Foucault pointed to such institutions as armies and schools that formed the categories of “soldier” and “student” through which individuals and groups could come to indentify themselves. Power would garner obedience through inducing pleasure in individuals, by producing and forming the very knowledge of their identity.

In a similar way to Foucault, Burke pointed to power’s productive capacities, though in terms of the “sentiments, manners, and moral opinions”\textsuperscript{43} of society. Like Foucault, Burke argued that a society could only be maintained through producing a form of knowledge that would generate “love, veneration, admiration, or attachment” into its citizens. Burke thought that

\begin{itemize}
  \item Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power” in \textit{The Foucault Reader}, p. 62.
  \item Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power” in \textit{The Foucault Reader}, p. 61.
\end{itemize}
in order for society to exist “there ought to be a system of manners in every nation which a well formed mind would be disposed to relish. To make [one] love [his] country, [his] country ought to be lovely.” Customs and manners, therefore, produced a sentiment within its subjects which acted like a social-glue in holding society together. Through producing the roles and identities of each individual, custom led men to obey power and therefore also allowed the social unit to function properly. Burke even more directly equated customs with power when elucidating what would happen if the local customs of society were disrupted. Burke argued that “power, of some kind or other, [would] survive the shock in which manners and opinions perish; and it [would] find other and worse means for its support.” Custom preceded one’s rational capabilities and produced each individual’s subjectivity and social role. Without custom, one could conclude like Maistre that French society ceased to exist; it ceased to exist because it destroyed France’s social glue—“because it violated so much, because it suddenly and harshly violated every kind of propriety, prejudice and custom.”

Around this common focus on power’s productive capabilities, one can see the implications for the concept of right. If subjects are conditioned by their social arrangements—their specific customs and laws or local forms of knowledge—one cannot appeal to natural right claims which assume that a subject is anterior to society and social power. If power exceeds the grasp of subjects and therefore creates the subject, the legitimate demands that a subject can make on his government need to be found within the very framework of society. In Foucault’s words: a subject always finds himself in existing power relations and must always negotiate with

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45 Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, p. 87.
these power relations, anchoring his demands within a local context.

This is precisely what Burke meant when he commented in his *Reflections* that the English revolutionaries of 1688 offered a better conception of rights than the French revolutionaries. Burke argued that the English revolutionaries claimed “their franchises not on abstract principles ‘as rights of men’ but as the rights of Englishmen, and as a patrimony derived from their forefathers.” This claim pointed to their acceptance of the “the sacredness of a hereditary principle of succession in [the] government” and to their recognition of the validity of the English constitution. They founded their right within concrete institutions and practices, within the real relations of productive power which formed society. Maistre, similarly, argued that since the original English revolutionaries “activated their old constitution and took their declarations of rights from it,” they were justified in their revolt; they were seeking to maintain the principles encompassed in their constitution and were cognizant of the need to work within an already existent system of power. After all, Maistre had only ever “seen Frenchmen, Italian, Russians” in his life—men of local identity. “But for man,” Maistre claimed, “I declare that I have never met him in my life; If he exists he is unknown to me.”

Foucault made a similar claim to Burke and Maistre’s preference for local rights. To understand his alignment with local rights discourse more clearly, one must look at the unique language that Foucault used in his works. Although in his primary works, Foucault did not use the specific word “right,” he often spoke of power relations as something that could only be

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48 As quoted in Introduction of Maistre, *Consideration on France*, p. xxiii.
“negotiated” and “resisted.” Foucault argued that since power relations came “from below”—they came into play from local points: from “families, limited groups and [local] institutions” —local negotiation was required in altering any relation. Foucault’s concept of local negotiation mimicked Burke and Maistre’s claims that a demand of right could only be made in light of a local context.

In this light, one can see how Foucault would embrace the historico-political discourse which privileged an understanding of right as locally dependent. Foucault described the historico-political discourse as regarding rights as “strongly marked by a relationship of property, conquest, victory [and] nature… grounded in history and decentered from juridical universality.” 49 Rights appealed to local political events or practices as their justification and left rational argumentation completely divorced from their formulation. This meant that when one was to demand or assert a right, he would only be talking of “‘his’ rights.” Rights would have to appeal to a specific local context regarding the specific experiences of the speaker making the claim: “It might be the right of his family or race, the right of superiority or seniority, the right of triumphal invasions, or the right of recent or ancient occupations.”50 This appeal to local rights sounded just like Foucault’s claim that one must negotiate and work within power-relations.

The shared focus on local legitimacy could be demonstrated by an additional point that each author shared: that there is no right to revolution. Burke, for example, demonstrated this

49 Over here, man’s nature should be understood in the classical sense of man’s proper end, telos. Nature understood in this way has no relevance to human biology or, in Greek terminology, bare life, zoe. Nature is rather concerned with the telos of political existence, bios.

50 Michel Foucault, Society Must Be Defended, p. 52.
point through denying the right to revolution in a unique way. At first glance, denying a right to revolution was not necessarily unique to Burkean philosophy for that denial was also found in other social contract theorists. Even though theorists like Locke and Rousseau defended the right to revolution, Hobbes categorically denied it. What was unique then for Burke was the way in which he denied the right to revolution. For Hobbes, a revolution was not consistent with the terms by which men agreed to give up their rights. A revolution was not allowed because it was inconsistent with the goal of getting oneself out of a “state of nature” and inconsistent with the initial reasons given to form society. For Burke, however, the drive for consistency was irrelevant to denying a right to revolution and, even more so, was part of the geometric rationality that he so much despised. Burke rather claimed that true revolution was impossible because it misunderstood the ways in which power functioned throughout society; it misunderstood that power exceeded and produced the individual subject and that the subject could never escape power.

In a starkly similar way, Foucault claimed that a right to revolution was a mere impossibility. Foucault argued that, since power could only be negotiated and resisted, “there [was] no single locus of great refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary.”  

Without a central point of power, there could be no liberation: “The irony of this deployment [of a central power] is having us believe that our “liberation” is in the balance.” Power, however, is dispersed through society in a way that talking of revolution is always inconsistent with the status of reality.


But what of the real revolutions that took place, such as the French Revolution? Didn’t this prove the Revolution was possible? Foucault actually asked these questions himself, “Are there no great radical ruptures, massive binary division, then?” And to this question, Foucault answered, “Occasionally Yes.”53 But a great binary struggle never points to an attempt of removing repressive power. It rather points to a massive rupture in the recoding of power’s logic. Foucault would be led to say as Maistre himself said: “We cannot repeat too often that men do not lead the Revolution; it is the Revolution that uses men.”54 When one perceives a Revolutionary movement in action, it really represents a force outside the hands of man. Whether one wants to call this force Providence, like Maistre, or Power, like Foucault, it acts in our midst without a guiding agent.

4. The “Historico-Political Discourse” Part 2: Truth and War

In addition to the death of the universal subject, the historical emphasis of the historico-political discourse led Foucault to yet another conclusion. Since society could not be understood in light of philosophical inquiry, Foucault argued that the truth of society’s makeup came to light in recalling the real historical conflicts that took place through the semblances of history. The realization that truth often stood hand-and-hand with conflict was hinted in this historico discourse in so far that it was also a political discourse. Foucault wanted to understand the term

54 Joseph de Maistre, Considerations on France, pp. 7, 8.
“political,” at least initially if not in its entirety, by inverting Clausewitz’s famous proposition and claiming that “politics [was] the continuation of war by other means.”56 Through defining political in this way, one was led to the realization of war’s centrality in all socio-political life.

But why exactly was war so central? The centrality of war was important because war, battle and conflict animated and revived political society. Foucault’s genealogical studies pointed to this fact: through investigating the historico-political discourse, he uncovered a perspective which spoke of the dark connection between relations of conflict and the animation political society. And yet again, Foucault was not alone with this perspective. Burke and Maistre were similarly fascinated by the centrality of war in the formation of political society; in addition, each pointed to the unique capabilities of war and conflict in animating and reviving society.

While Foucault and Maistre spoke of war explicitly, Burke’s connection to war was rather distinct. While it may seem counterintuitive to connect Burke to war, especially in light of the common interpretation of Burke as an easy-going traditionalist, Burke implicitly pointed to the centrality of war in understanding socio-political relations through his analysis of aesthetics, specifically regarding the concept of the sublime. In his treatise, Burke made a distinction between two types of pleasures garnered from the two aesthetic categories of the Sublime and the Beautiful. He explained that the pleasures of the beautiful were generated from affirmative experiences of pleasure, while the pleasures of the sublime depended on the absence of terrible pleasures.

55 Clausewitz’s famous principle: “War is a mere continuation of policy by other means…. War is not merely a political act, but also a truly political instrument, a continuation of political commerce, a carrying out of the same by other means.” Carl Von Clausewitz, One War, edited with an introduction by Anatol Rapoport (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982). See “Society Must Be Defended,” Lecture 1, Note 9.

56 Michel Foucault, “Society Must Be Defended,” p. 15.
experiences—on the absence of pain. Burke elucidated that the sublime experience of pleasure appealed to such qualities as distance, obscurity and extremity. Distance allowed one to view pain without the threat of experiencing it while obscurity and extremity often created a state of confusion, ambiguity, and dread within its observer without a real danger—each quality generating pleasure through insuring an absence of pain. Still, while each quality insured an absence, they each shared in common a dependency on external forces of Power: “Pain is always inflicted by a power in some way superior, because we never submit to pain willingly.”57 A painful event of powerful proportion is always necessary to generate the sublime even while an additional quality must simultaneously insure pain’s absence. Immediately, then, one can see how the concept of the sublime could be connected to the concept of war. War encapsulates violent actions of unimaginable terror in which pain reaches its most extreme realization. As well, war tends to encapsulate the utmost irrationality and obscurity of thought: Why would one reasonably take part in war? When experienced at a distance, war could generate all the thrills of possible death without its immediate dangers. War could be an exciting event for those absent from the front lines.

Burke not only described the sublime as connected to war, but also painted to the sublime as a more preferable aesthetic quality. Burke explicitly pointed to his preference for the sublime and can therefore be seen as implicitly promoting war. Burke considered the sublime as “the most powerful of all the passions”58 because it “tend[ed] to raise a man in his own opinion, produce[d] a sort of swelling and triumph that [wa]s extremely grateful to the human mind.”


Quite simply, the sublime animated man allowing him to develop confidence as well as a healthy ego. In contrast, the pleasures derived from beautiful objects would be “quickly satisfie[d]” and would lead man to “relapse into indifference.” 59 This indifference, in turn, was only a minor step on a path to an even more horrid outcome: in a “languid inactive state, the nerves [were] more liable to the most horrid convulsions, than when they [were] sufficiently braced and strengthened. *Melancholy, dejection, despair and often self-murder, [was] the consequence of... this relaxed state of body.*” 60 While the sublime, and therefore war, could animate man, the qualities of the beautiful would lead to his dissipation and death.

On a closer glance, Burke portrayed the sublime as a quality which had less concern with animating individual man and more to do with animating society as a whole; in this way then Burke implicitly connected war with animating society. The reason that the sublime had a stronger social focus was because only through a social relationship could the sublime accommodate two contradictory experiences that it would generate. The contradiction stemmed from the fact that while the sublime often animated man, it also caused man to lose his sense of self: the painful and powerful force of the sublime often generated “ideas that rush[ed] in upon the mind” 61 and that would stifle one’s ego. These two contradictory experiences—an increased sense of self and a loss of self—therefore needed a system that could accommodate both. While Burke never specifically referred to this solution, a patriotic and nationalistic fervor towards one’s country could help solve this contradiction. While man could lose his individual sense of self from the sublime, he could simultaneously increase his sense of self by indentifying with his

59 Edmund Burke, *The Sublime and the Beautiful*, p. 82.


particular society. In this light, the sublime experiences of war could act as the ideal event in animating society by causing men to give up their individual identity.

In contrast to Burke, Maistre darkly, and more directly, pointed to the central importance of war in relation to political society. Maistre believed that there never existed a moment in history when war was not being waged or blood was not being spilt. Maistre declared that “in the vast domain of living things, there reigns an obvious violence, a kind of prescribed rage that arms all creatures to their common doom. As soon as you leave the inanimate kingdom, you find a decree of violent death written on the decree of life.” Since all living things ended up devouring or killing other living things, Maistre found only one possibility for who would be given the job of killing man. It would have to be “man himself who was charged with slaughtering man.” In respect to this inevitable reality, Maistre proclaimed that war was “a law of the world”—a necessary war permeated all of existence.

But why was war necessary? Maistre saw war and violence as necessary in order to animate society. Unlike those who viewed war as a terrible event, Maistre proclaimed that war was not “a great evil as [often] believed.” In Maistre view, man resembled nothing more than a simple tree. Just as a tree often required pruning to cut away its debilitations so it could continue to grow, man’s “laziness, incredulity and gangrenous vice [could be] retempered only in blood; Blood is the manure” of man. In this light, violence was not terrible at all. Violence and war allowed for society to rehabilitate itself in times of cultural decadence. When “the earth, thirsty for blood... opens it mouth to receive it and to keep it in its bosom until the time when it must

While he did not glorify and applaud war like Maistre, Foucault still pointed to the importance of war as tool for social analysis. With his disposal of the philosophico-juridical philosopher, Foucault pushed the ramifications of this disposal to its logical conclusion and was led to a new and interesting question to investigate: “As soon as one endeavors to detach power with its techniques and procedures from the form of law within which it has been theoretically confined up until now, one is driven to ask this basic question: Isn’t power simply a form of warlike domination?” 63 Foucault thought that there might be “a battle ‘for truth,’ or at least ‘around truth’… it being understood also that it’s a matter not of a battle ‘on behalf’ of the truth, but of a battle about the status of truth and the economic and political roles it plays.” 64 In this sense, truth was to be understood in a similar way to the individual subject—as a concept produced within relations of power.

The importance of this question led Foucault to spend a whole year of lectures at the College de France investigating the centrality of war as an analyzer of social-relations. While pointing to a number of different discourses and historical time periods, Foucault found one of the most detailed formulations of the war discourse in the writings of the Boulainvilliers of France during the early eighteenth century—a formulation which also stressed the animating capabilities of war for society. The Boulainvilliers emphasized how war helped found and maintain the state. They believed that the constitution of the state could not be traced to “an

64 Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in The Foucault Reader, 74.
explicit body of laws that were given at a certain moment” or to the transference of a right to a sovereign. Instead, they linked together “the two notions of constitution and revolution” so that the constitution of the state would always be accompanied by “a relationship of force” through the form of revolutionary violence. Further, the Boulainvilliers did not believe that this violent founding was a onetime event. They argued that the founding of the state would necessarily follow a “cyclical historical pattern” in which revolutionary violence would repeat and counter-revolutionary violence would stifle the revolution, thus reanimating and reconstituting the state.

The Boulainvilliers, further, stressed the importance of “a relationship of force” and its animating abilities through replacing the philosophico-juridical juxtaposition of the “savage” and “society” with a new relation of the “barbarian” and “civilization”. For the philosophico-juridical philosophers, the savage would give up his natural rights to a sovereign and enter into society through taking on the form of a subject or citizen. In these terms, society was founded on exchanging rights for protection and through dissolving a former identity. The discourse of the Boulainvilliers, however, turned to the image of the barbarian in order to define civilization. While the savage needed to leave savagery to help create a political society, the barbarian gave definition to a particular civilization only by existing outside of it; the barbarian existed in relation to civilization: “there is no barbarian unless an island of civilization exists somewhere, unless he lives outside of it, and unless he fights it.” In this discourse, defining a particular civilization, society or state could only happen through partaking in a conflict with an enemy


outside it. Through appealing to the barbarian, the Boulainvilliers constructed a narrative of political society which depended on an enemy as well as war and conflict.

Foucault’s acceptance of a discourse which described war as animating society, however, should not be seen as an implicit acceptance of this practice in a normative sense. After all, Foucault has been known as radical social critic and defender of leftist causes. So why, then, did Foucault seem to embrace a discourse which stressed exclusionary political consensus and a preference for war? Foucault accepted this discourse because it also offered another portrayal of war that he would normatively embrace; he found a different positive aspect of war that the Boulainvilliers brought to light—an aspect which was the exact inverse of war’s ability for animation. Foucault defined the historico-political discourse as also serving a “counter-historical function.” While on the one hand, the war discourse solidified and animated a society, on the other hand, it criticized totalizing forms of knowledge. In this discourse, Foucault found a critical capability to attack the normalizing rationality that stemmed from universal claims. After all, Foucault attempted to mimic this counter-historical function throughout many of his genealogical works; he attempted to recover the local narratives of sexuality, madness and delinquency that had been subjugated by the dominant discourses which often claimed exclusive interpretation to truth. Like the Boulainvilliers, Foucault used history “to occupy a decisive strategic position” in the struggle over truth.

5. Conclusion: What is left for the “Left”?

In his preference for the counter-historical aspects of the Boulainvilliers’ discourse,

67 Michel Foucault, “Society Must Be Defended,” p. 171.
Foucault distinguished himself from Burke and Maistre in an important way. While Burke and Maistre’s politics were more concerned with animating society and developing consensus, Foucault stressed criticism. Foucault and these theorists should therefore be seen as occupying two different political positions—one of criticism and one of consensus—within a common conservative world-view. Still, it is precisely in this important distinction—in this critical attitude—that many members of the political Left have found an attractive political philosophy.

Many on the Left have used Foucault’s anti-essentialist views to disturb social categories of exclusion. However, to truly reflect on the political possibilities for a Left which relies on Foucauldian philosophy, one must ask a more general question regarding politics: In light of Foucault’s conservative world-view, what does it mean to act politically?

Foucault described his interpretation of politics in an important interview with Paul Rainbow in 1981. Foucault commented that “the questions [he] is trying to ask are not determined by a pre-established political outlook and do not tend toward the realization of some definite political project…” for “the forms of totalization offered by politics are always in fact, very limited.” In his perspective, any form of political consensus would create some kind of totalizing norm. While a local politics is less totalizing than a universal one, they nevertheless both end in exclusionary results. In turn, Foucault claimed that he was “attempting, to the contrary, apart from any totalization—which would be at once abstract and limiting—to open up problems that are as concrete and general as possible.”

His project therefore focused on a never-ending problematization and resisted the impetus to offer solutions to specific problems. Even when asked whether he would support a utopian vision of consensus which, although

68 Michel Foucault, “Politics and Ethics: An Interview,” in The Foucault Reader, p. 375.
unrealistic, might pragmatically lead to positive results for society, Foucault paradoxically commented in a way quite fitting for his disposition “that perhaps one must not be for consensuality, but one must be against nonconsensuality.”

Foucault, therefore, maintained that he “would more or less agree with the idea that in fact what interests [him] is much more morals than politics.” Foucault’s ethical activity was compromised of a two step process: first, one would criticize fixed norms of exclusionary domination, and second, in this displacement one could recreate his own identity. His ethics were not only critical but also highly individualistic and for the very important reason that consensual politics would never liquidate “the problem of the power relation” and its relations of domination.

One can conclude from Foucault’s rejection of political consensus and promotion of a critical ethics that any attempt to affirmatively partake in politics would create exclusion. This, however, leads to a disturbing interpretation of politics which sounds radically similar to that of the Schmittian dictum: “The specific political distinction to which all political actions and motive can be reduced is the between friend and enemy.” Carl Schmitt, a jurist and important theorist for the Nazi party, believed that if one were to embrace political consensus he would also have to embrace the creation of an enemy. This ideology helped fuel the Nazi idea that there existed an enemy that inevitably had to be confronted and, in moments of extremity, actually

destroyed. Foucault’s view, similarly, seems to dictate that anyone who affirmatively partakes in politics will have to face an exclusion which is born out of his totalization. Even so-called progressive arguments for freedom, peace, and equality would also end in destruction; the French Revolution demonstrated this after all. In fear of the Schmittian truth that political action leads to domination, Foucault rejected political consensus altogether.

But perhaps one can say that there is a difference between Foucault and Schmitt—the difference being (and of which many on the Left have adamantly proposed) that Foucault does not see this political distinction as essential. This argument, however, fails for two reasons. First, it is not so clear that Schmitt is essentialist. Schmitt reserved the possibility that one day society could exist without enemies and without exclusion. Second, even if we were to interpret Schmitt as embracing exclusion as essential, Foucault, at the very least, would be temporarily accepting his definition of the political; as for the near future, Foucault’s political definition would be a Schmittian one. The distinction of essentialism becomes irrelevant for the here and now of politics. Therefore, in deriding politics as dominative, Foucault embraced a pessimistic view of the political realm. Foucault rejected to participate in normative politics

72 This essentialist/non-essentialist distinction could also be used attack the more general argument of my paper—to try and discount Foucault’s conservative world-view i.e. While Foucault only sees the historico-political discourse as a discourse, Burke and Maistre see it as essential. This critique fails for the same reasons as above. First, it is not so clear that Burke is an essentialist. After all, Burke recognized that “the age of chivalry [was] gone” (238) and that a “spirit of change” (175) had come to define modern society. Second even for a more essentialist thinker like Maistre, the critique of essentialism seems irrelevant. The fact is that in this moment Foucault and Maistre perceive political society in the same way.

precisely because of his agreement with the Schmittian dictum.

For an author who so often refused to accept the blackmail of binary opposition, Foucault then leaves us with only two options under the political configurations of our modern epoch: ethics or politics—criticism or consensus. Foucault’s portrayal of our current social arrangements gives a quite gloomy view of any affirmative political position. In this sense, a Left anchored around Foucauldian philosophy would have to be politically passive if not harshly anti-political. Not only would the Marxist dream of revolution disappear but even more moderate positions, such as those of Arendt and Habermas in which certain forms of political action and consensus can be positive, would have to be disregarded. Foucault’s philosophy dictates that those who affirmatively take part in political action take a Schmittian position. Thus, those on the Left with a Foucauldian orientation must ask themselves if they are willing to accept this outcome.