WHAT IS AN APPARATUS?

and Other Essays

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§ What Is an Apparatus?

I.

Terminological questions are important in philosophy. As a philosopher for whom I have the greatest respect once said, terminology is the poetic moment of thought. This is not to say that philosophers must always necessarily define their technical terms. Plato never defined *ideu,* his most important term. Others, like Spinoza and Leibniz, preferred instead to define their terminology *more geometrico.*

The hypothesis that I wish to propose is that the word *dispositif,* or "apparatus in English, is a decisive technical term in the strategy of Foucault's thought.[1] He uses it quite often, especially from the mid 1970s, when he begins to concern himself with what he calls "governmentality" or the "government of men." Though he never offers a complete definition, he

comes close to something like it in an interview from 1977:

> What I'm trying to single out with this term is, first and foremost, a thoroughly heterogeneous set consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the network that can be established between these elements . . .
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>   . . . by the term "apparatus" I mean a-kind of a formation, so to speak, that at a given historical moment has as its major function the response to an urgency. The apparatus therefore has a dominant strategic function . . .
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>   . . . I said that the nature of an apparatus is essentially strategic, which means that we are speaking about a certain manipulation of relations of forces, of a rational and concrete intervention in the relations of forces, either so as to develop them in a particular direction, or to block them, to stabilize them, and to utilize them. The apparatus is thus always inscribed into a play of power, but it is also always linked to certain limits of knowledge that arise from it and, to an equal degree, condition it. The apparatus is precisely this: a set of strategies of the relations of forces supporting, and supported by, certain types of knowledge.[2]

Let me briefly summarize three points:

a. It is a heterogeneous set that includes virtually anything, linguistic and nonlinguistic, under the

same heading: discourses, institutions, buildings, laws, police measures, philosophical propositions, and so on. The apparatus itself is the network that is established between these elements.

b. The apparatus always has a concrete strategic function and is always located in a power relation.

c. As such, it appears at the intersection of power relations and relations of knowledge.

2.

I would like now to try and trace a brief genealogy of this term, first in the work of Foucault, and then in a broader historical context.

At the end of the 1960s, more or less at the time when he was writing *The Archeology of Knowledge,* Foucault does not yet use the term "apparatus" in order to define the object of his research. Instead, he uses the term *positivité,* "positivity," an etymological neighbor of *dispositif* again without offering us a definition.

I often asked myself where Foucault found this term, until the moment when, a few months ago, I reread a book by Jean Hyppolite entitled *Introduction à la philosophie de l' histoire de Hegel.* You probably know about the strong link that ties Foucault to Hyppolite,

a person whom he referred to at times as "my master" (Hyppolite was in fact his teacher, first during the *khâgne* in the Lycée Henri-IV [the preparatory course for the Ecole normale supérieure] and then in the Ecole normale).

The third part of Hyppolite s book bears the title "Raison et histoire: Les idées de positivité et de destin" (Reason and History: The Ideas of Positivity and Destiny). The focus here is on the analysis of two works that date from Hegel's years in Bern and Frankfurt (1795-96): The first is "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Destiny," and the second·—where we find the term that interests us—"The Positivity of the Christian Religion" *{Die Positivität der christliche Religion).* According to Hyppolite, "destiny" and "positivity" are two key concepts in Hegel's thought. In particular, the term "positivity" finds in Hegel its proper place in the opposition between "natural religion" and "positive religion." While natural religion is concerned with the immediate and general relation of human reason with the divine, positive or historical religion encompasses the set of beliefs, rules, and rites that in a certain society and at a certain historical moment are externally imposed on individuals. "A positive religion," Hegel writes in a passage cited by Hyppolite, "implies feelings that are more or less impressed through constraint on souls; these are actions that are the effect of

command and the result of obedience and are accomplished without direct interest."[3]

Hyppolite shows how the opposition between nature and positivity corresponds, in this sense, to the dialectics of freedom and obligation, as well as of reason and history. In a passage that could not have failed to provoke Foucault's curiosity, because it in a way presages the notion of apparatus, Hyppolite writes:

> We see here the knot of questions implicit in the concept of positivity, as well as Hegel's successive attempts to bring together dialectically—a dialectics that is not yet conscious of itself—*pure reason* (theoretical and above all practical) and positivity, that is, *the historical element.* In a certain sense, Hegel considers positivity as an obstacle to the freedom of man, and as such it is condemned. To investigate the positive elements of a religion, and we might add, of a social state, means to discover in them that which is imposed through a constraint on man, that which obfuscates the purity of reason. But, in another sense—and this is the aspect that ends up having the upper hand in the course of Hegel's development—positivity must be reconciled with reason, which then loses its abstract character and adapts to the concrete richness of life. We see then why the concept of positivity is at the center of Hegelian perspectives.[4]

If "positivity" is the name that, according to Hyppolite, the young Hegel gives to the historical element—loaded as it is with rules, rites, and institutions that are imposed on the individual by an external

power, but that become, so to speak, internalized in the systems of beliefs and feelings—then Foucault, by borrowing this term (later to become "apparatus"), takes a position with respect to a decisive problem, which is actually also his own problem: the relation between individuals as living beings and the historical element. By "the historical element," I mean the set of institutions, of processes of subjectification, and of rules in which power relations become concrete. Foucault's ultimate aim is not, then, as in Hegel, the reconciliation of the two elements; it is not even to emphasize their conflict. For Foucault, what is at stake is rather the investigation of concrete modes in which the positivities (or the apparatuses) act within the relations, mechanisms, and "plays" of power.

3.

It should now be clear in what sense I have advanced the hypothesis that "apparatus" is an essential technical term in Foucault's thought. What is at stake here is not a particular term that refers only to this or that technology of power. It is a general term that has the same breadth as the term "positivity" had, according to Hyppolite, for the young Hegel. Within Foucault's strategy, it comes to occupy the place of one of those terms that he defines, critically, as "the

universals" *(les universaux)*. Foucault, as you know, always refused to deal with the general categories or mental constructs that he calls "the universals," such as the State, Sovereignty, Law, and Power. But this is not to say that there are no operative concepts with a general character in his thought. Apparatuses are, in point of fact, what take the place of the universals in the Foucauldian strategy: not simply this or that police measure, this or that technology of power, and not even the generality obtained by their abstraction. Instead, as he claims in the interview from 1977, an apparatus is "the network *[le réseau]* that can be established between these elements."

If we now try to examine the definition of apparatus" that can be found in common French dictionaries, we see that they distinguish between three meanings of the term:

a. A strictly juridical sense: "Apparatus is the part of a judgment that contains the decision separate from the opinion." That is, the section of a sentence that decides, or the enacting clause of a law.

b. A technological meaning: "The way in which the parts of a machine or of a mechanism and, by extension, the mechanism itself are arranged."

c. A military use: "The set of means arranged in conformity with a plan."

To some extent, the three definitions are all present in Foucault. But dictionaries, in particular those that lack a historical-etymological character, divide and separate this term into a variety of meanings. This fragmentation, nevertheless, generally corresponds to the historical development and articulation of a unique original meaning that we should not lose sight of. What is this original meaning for the term "apparatus"? The term certainly refers, in its common Foucauldian use, to a set of practices and mechanisms (both linguistic and nonlinguistic, juridical, technical, and military) that aim to face an urgent need and to obtain an effect that is more or less immediate. But what is the strategy of practices or of thought, what is the historical context, from which the modern term originates?

4.

Over the past three years, I have found myself increasingly involved in an investigation that is only now beginning to come to its end, one that I can roughly define as a theological genealogy of economy. In the first centuries of Church history—let's say, between the second and sixth centuries c.e.—the Greek term *oikonomia* develops a decisive theological function. In Greek, *oikonomia* signifies the administration of the *oikos* (the home) and, more generally, management.

We are dealing here, as Aristotle says (*Politics Щ^Ьгх),* not with an epistemic paradigm, but with a praxis, with a practical activity that must face a problem and a particular situation each and every time. Why, then, did the Fathers of the Church feel the need to introduce this term into theological discourse? How did they come to speak about a "divine economy"?

What is at issue here, to be precise, is an extremely delicate and vital problem, perhaps the decisive question in the history of Christian theology: the Trinity. When the Fathers of the Church began to argue during the second century about the threefold nature of the divine figure (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit), there was, as one can imagine, a powerful resistance from reasonable-minded people in the Church who were horrified at the prospect of reintroducing polytheism and paganism to the Christian faith. In order to convince those stubborn adversaries (who were later called "monarchians," that is, promoters of the government of a single God), theologians such as Tertullian, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and many others could not find a better term to serve their need than the Greek *oikonomia.* Their argument went something like this: "God, insofar as his being and substance is concerned, is certainly one; but as to his *oikonomia*—that is to say the way in which he administers his home, his life, and the world that he created—he

is, rather, triple. Just as a good father can entrust to his son the execution of certain functions and duties without in so doing losing his power and his unity, so God entrusts to Christ the economy,' the administration and government of human history." *Oikonomia* therefore became a specialized term signifying in particular the incarnation of the Son, together with the economy of redemption and salvation (this is the reason why in Gnostic sects, Christ is called "the man of economy," *ho anthrõpos tés oikonomias)*. The theologians slowly got accustomed to distinguishing between a "discourse—or *logos*—of theology" and a *"logos* of economy." *Oikonomia* became thereafter an apparatus through which the Trinitarian dogma and the idea of a divine providential governance of the world were introduced into the Christian faith.

But, as often happens, the fracture that the theologians had sought to avoid by removing it from the plane of God's being, reappeared in the form of a caesura that separated in Him being and action, ontology and praxis. Action (economy, but also politics) has no foundation in being: this is the schizophrenia that the theological doctrine of *oikonomia* left as its legacy to Western culture.

5

I think that even on the basis of this brief exposition, we can now account for the centrality and importance of the function that the notion of *oikonomia* performed in Christian theology. Already in Clement of Alexandria, *oikonomia* merges with the notion of Providence and begins to indicate the redemptive governance of the world and human history. Now, what is the translation of this fundamental Greek term in the writings of the Latin Fathers? *Dispositio.*

The Latin term *dispositio*, from which the French term *dispositif,* or apparatus, derives, comes therefore to take on the complex semantic sphere of the theological *oikonomia.* The dispositifs about which Foucault speaks are somehow linked to this theological legacy. They can be in some way traced back to the fracture that divides and, at the same time, articulates in God being and praxis, the nature or essence, on the one hand, and the operation through which He administers and governs the created world, on the other. The term "apparatus" designates that in which, and through which, one realizes a pure activity of governance devoid of any foundation in being. This is the reason why apparatuses must always imply a process of subjectification, that is to say, they must produce their subject.

In light of this theological genealogy the Foucauldian apparatuses acquire an even more pregnant and decisive significance, since they intersect not only with the context of what the young Hegel called "positivity," but also with what the later Heidegger called *Gestell* (which is similar from an etymological point of view to *dis-positio, dis-ponere,* just as the German *stellen* corresponds to the Latin *poneré).* When Heidegger, in *Die Technik und die Kehre* (The Question Concerning Technology), writes that *Ge-stell* means in ordinary usage an apparatus *(Gerät),* but that he intends by this term "the gathering together of the (installation [*Stellen*] that (in)stalls man, this is to say, challenges him to expose the real in the mode of ordering [*Bestellen*]," the proximity of this term to the theological *dispositio,* as well as to Foucault's apparatuses, is evident.[5] What is common to all these terms is that they refer back to this *oikonomia,* that is, to a set of practices, bodies of knowledge, measures, and institutions that aim to manage, govern, control, and orient—in a way that purports to be useful—-the behaviors, gestures, and thoughts of human beings.

6.

One of the methodological principles that I constantly follow in my investigations is to identify in the texts and contexts on which I work what Feuerbach

used to call the philosophical element, that is to say, the point of their *Entwicklungsfähigkeit* (literally, capacity to be developed), the locus and the moment wherein they are susceptible to a development. Nevertheless, whenever we interpret and develop the text of an author in this way, there comes a moment when we are aware of our inability to proceed any further without contravening the most elementary rules of hermeneutics. This means that the development of the text in question has reached a point of undecidability where it becomes impossible to distinguish between the author and the interpreter. Although this is a particularly happy moment for the interpreter, he knows that it is now time to abandon the text that he is analyzing and to proceed on his own.

I invite you therefore to abandon the context of Foucauldian philology in which we have moved up to now in order to situate apparatuses in a new context.

I wish to propose to you nothing less than a general and massive partitioning of beings into two large groups or classes: on the one hand, living beings (or substances), and on the other, apparatuses in which living beings are incessantly captured. On one side, then, to return to the terminology of the theologians, lies the ontology of creatures, and on the other side, the *oikonomia* of apparatuses that seek to govern and guide them toward the good.

Further expanding the already large class of Foucauidian apparatuses, I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings. Not only, therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, juridical measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and—-why not—language itself, which is perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses—one in which thousands and thousands of years ago aprímate inadvertently let himself be captured, probably without realizing the consequences that he was about to face.

To recapitulate, we have then two great classes: living beings (or substances) and apparatuses. And, between these two, as a third class, subjects. I call a subject that which results from the relation and, so to speak, from the relentless fight between living beings and apparatuses. Naturally, the substances and the subjects, as in ancient metaphysics, seem to overlap, but not completely. In this sense, for example, the same individual, the same substance, can be the place of multiple processes of subjectification: the user of cellular phones, the web surfer, the writer of stories,

the tango aficionado, the anti-globalization activist, and so on and so forth. The boundless growth of apparatuses in our time corresponds to the equally extreme proliferation in processes of subjectification. This may produce the impression that in our time, the category of subjectivity is wavering and losing its consistency; but what is at stake, to be precise, is not an erasure or an overcoming, but rather a dissemination that pushes to the extreme the masquerade that has always accompanied every personal identity.

7

It would probably not be wrong to define the extreme phase of capitalist development in which we live as a massive accumulation and proliferation of apparatuses. It is clear that ever since Homo sapiens first appeared, there have been apparatuses; but we could say that today there is not even a single instant in which the life of individuals is not modeled, contaminated, or controlled by some apparatus. In what way, then, can we confront this situation, what strategy must we follow in our everyday hand-to-hand struggle with apparatuses? What we are looking for is neither simply to destroy them nor, as some naively suggest, to use them in the correct way.

For example, I live in Italy, a country where the gestures and behaviors of individuals have been reshaped

from top to toe by the cellular telephone (which the Italians dub the *telefonino)*. I have developed an implacable hatred for this apparatus, which has made the relationship between people all the more abstract. Although I found myself more than once wondering how to destroy or deactivate those *telefonini,* as well as how to eliminate or at least to punish and imprison those who do not stop using them, I do not believe that this is the right solution to the problem.

The fact is that according to all indications, apparatuses are not a mere accident in which humans are caught by chance, but rather are rooted in the very process of "humanization" that made "humans" out of the animals we classify under the rubric Homo sapiens. In fact, the event that has produced the human constitutes, for the living being, something like a division, which reproduces in some way the division that the *oikonomia* introduced in God between being and action. This division separates the living being from itself and from its immediate relationship with its environment—that is, with what Jakob von Uexküll and then Heidegger name the circle of receptors-disinhibitors. The break or interruption of this relationship produces in living beings both boredom that is, the capacity to suspend this immediate relationship with their disinhibitors—and the Open, which is the possibility of knowing being as such, by constructing a

world. But, along with these possibilities, we must also immediately consider the apparatuses that crowd the Open with instruments, objects, gadgets, odds and ends, and various technologies. Through these apparatuses, man attempts to nullify the animalistic behaviors that are now separated from him, and to enjoy the Open as such, to enjoy being insofar as it is being. At the root of each apparatus lies an all-too-human desire for happiness. The capture and subjectification of this desire in a separate sphere constitutes the specific power of the apparatus.

8.

All of this means that the strategy that we must adopt in our hand-to-hand combat with apparatuses cannot be a simple one. This is because what we are dealing with here is the liberation of that which remains captured and separated by means of apparatuses, in order to bring it back to a possible common use. It is from this perspective that I would like now to speak about a concept that I happen to have worked on recently. I am referring to a term that originates in the sphere of Roman law and religion (law and religion are closely connected, and not only in ancient Rome): profanation.

According to Roman law, objects that belonged in some way to the gods were considered sacred or

religious. As such, these things were removed from free use and trade among humans: they could neither be sold nor given as security, neither relinquished for the enjoyment of others nor subjected to servitude. Sacrilegious were the acts that violated or transgressed the special unavailability of these objects, which were reserved either for celestial beings (and so they were properly called "sacred") or for the beings of the netherworld (in this case, they were simply called "religious"). While "to consecrate" *{sacrare)* was the term that designated the exit of things from the sphere of human law, "to profane" signified, on the contrary, to restore the thing to the free use of men. "Profane, the great jurist Trebatius was therefore able to write, is, in the truest sense of the word, that which was sacred or religious, but was then restored to the use and property of human beings."

From this perspective, one can define religion as that which removes things, places, animals, or people from common use and transports them to a separate sphere. Not only is there no religion without separation, but every separation contains or conserves in itself a genuinely religious nucleus. The apparatus that activates and regulates separation is sacrifice. Through a series of minute rituals that vary from culture to culture (which Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss have patiently inventoried), sacrifice always sanctions the

passage of something from the profane to the sacred, from the human sphere to the divine. But what has been ritually separated can also be restored to the profane sphere. Profanation is the counter-apparatus that restores to common use what sacrifice had separated and divided.

9.

From this perspective, capitalism and other modern forms of power seem to generalize and push to the extreme the processes of separation that define religion. If we consider once again the theological genealogy of apparatuses that I have traced above (a genealogy that connects them to the Christian paradigm of *oikonomia,* that is to say, the divine governance of the world), we can then see that modern apparatuses differ from their traditional predecessors in a way that renders any attempt to profane them particularly problematic. Indeed, every apparatus implies a process of subjectification, without which it cannot function as an apparatus of governance, but is rather reduced to a mere exercise of violence. On this basis, Foucault has demonstrated how, in a disciplinary society, apparatuses aim to create—through a series of practices, discourses, and bodies of knowledge—docile, yet free, bodies that assume their identity and their "freedom" as subjects in

the very process of their desubjectification. Apparatus, then, is first of all a machine that produces subjectifications, and only as such is it also a machine of governance. The example of confession may elucidate the matter at hand: the formation of Western subjectivity that both splits and, nonetheless, masters and secures the self, is inseparable from this centuries-old activity of the apparatus of penance—an apparatus in which a new I is constituted through the negation and, at the same time, the assumption of the old I. The split of the subject performed by the apparatus of penance resulted, therefore, in the production of a new subject, which found its real truth in the nontruth of the already repudiated sinning I. Analogous considerations can be made concerning the apparatus of the prison: here is an apparatus that produces, as a more or less unforeseen consequence, the constitution of a subject and of a milieu of delinquents, who then become the subject of new—-and, this time, perfectly calculated—- techniques of governance.

What defines the apparatuses that we have to deal with in the current phase of capitalism is that they no longer act as much through the production of a subject, as through the processes of what can be called desubjectification. A desubjectifying moment is certainly implicit in every process of subjectification. As we have seen, the penitential self is constituted only

through its own negation. But what we are now witnessing is that processes of subjectification and processes of desubjectification seem to become reciprocally indifferent, and so they do not give rise to the recomposition of a new subject, except in larval or, as it were, spectral form. In the nontruth of the subject, its own truth is no longer at stake. He who lets himself be captured by the "cellular telephone" apparatus—whatever the intensity of the desire that has driven him—cannot acquire a new subjectivity, but only a number through which he can, eventually, be controlled. The spectator who spends his evenings in front of the television set only gets, in exchange for his desubjectification, the frustrated mask of the couch potato, or his inclusion in the calculation of viewership ratings.

Here lies the vanity of the well-meaning discourse on technology, which asserts that the .problem with apparatuses can be reduced to the question of their correct use. Those who make such claims seem to ignore a simple fact: If a certain process of subjectification (or, in this case, desubjectification) corresponds to every apparatus, then it is impossible for the subject of an apparatus to use it "in the right way." Those who continue to promote similar arguments are, for their part, the product of the media apparatus in which they are captured.

IO.

Contemporary societies therefore present themselves as inert bodies going through massive processes of desubjectification without acknowledging any real subjectification. Hence the eclipse of politics, which used to presuppose the existence of subjects and real identities (the workers' movement, the bourgeoisie, etc.), and the triumph of the *oikonomia*, that is to say, of a pure activity of government that aims at nothing other than its own replication. The Right and the Left, which today alternate in the management of power, have for this reason very little to do with the political sphere in which they originated. They are simply the names of two poles the first pointing without scruple to desubjectification, the second wanting instead to hide behind the hypocritical mask of the good democratic citizen—of the same governmental machine.

This, above all, is the source of the peculiar uneasiness of power precisely during an era in which it confronts the most docile and cowardly social body that has ever existed in human history. It is only an apparent paradox that the harmless citizen of postindustrial democracies (the *Bloom*, as it has been effectively suggested he be called),[0] who readily does everything that he is asked to do, inasmuch as he leaves his everyday

gestures and his health, his amusements and his occupations, his diet and his desires, to be commanded and controlled in the smallest detail by apparatuses, is also considered by power—-perhaps precisely because of this—as a potential terrorist. While a new European norm imposes biometric apparatuses on all its citizens by developing and perfecting anthropometric technologies invented in the nineteenth century in order to identify recidivist criminals (from mug shots to fingerprinting), surveillance by means of video cameras transforms the public space of the city into the interior of an immense prison. In the eyes of authority—and maybe rightly so—nothing looks more like a terrorist than the ordinary man.

The more apparatuses pervade and disseminate their power in every field of life, the more government will find itself faced with an elusive element, which seems to escape its grasp the more it docilely submits to it. This is neither to say that this element constitutes a revolutionary subject in its own right, nor that it can halt or even threaten the governmental machine. Rather than the proclaimed end of history, we are, in fact, witnessing the incessant though aimless motion of this machine, which, in a sort of colossal parody of theological *oikonomia,* has assumed the legacy of the providential governance of the world; yet instead of redeeming our world, this machine (true to the original

eschatological vocation of Providence) is leading us to catastrophe. The problem of the profanation of apparatuses—that is to say, the restitution to common use of what has been captured and separated in them · is, for this reason, all the more urgent. But this problem cannot be properly raised as long as those who are concerned with it are unable to intervene in their own processes of subjectification, any more than in their own apparatuses, in order to then bring to light the Ungovernable, which is the beginning and, at the same time, the vanishing point of every politics.

§ The Friend

I.

Friendship is so tightly linked to the definition of philosophy that it can be said that without it, philosophy would not really be possible. The intimacy between friendship and philosophy is so profound that philosophy contains the *philos,* the friend, in its very name, and, as often happens with such an excessive proximity, the risk runs high of not making heads or tails of it. In the classical world, this promiscuity, this near consubstantiality, of the friend and the philosopher was taken as a given. It is certainly with a somewhat archaizing intent, then, that a contemporary philosopher—when posing the extreme question "What is philosophy?"—was able to write that this is a question to be discussed *entre amis,* between friends. Today the relationship between friendship and philosophy has actually fallen into discredit, and it is with a