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Luís Antônio Cunha Ribeiro

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Edited by:

Goethe University Frankfurt am Main
Department of Law
Grüneburgplatz 1
60629 Frankfurt am Main
Tel.: [+49] (0)69 - 798 34341
Fax: [+49] (0)69 - 798 34523

The Foucaultian Archaeological Method in Giorgio Agamben

*Abstract: Agamben has claimed to work inside the tradition inaugurated by the archaeological method of Michel Foucault but not to fully coincide with it. “My method is archaeological and paradigmatic in a sense which is very close to that of Foucault, but not completely coincident with it. The question is, facing the dichotomies that structuralize our culture, to go beyond the exceptions that have been producing the former, however, not to find a chronologically originary state, but to be able to understand the situation in which we are. Archaeology is, in this sense, the only way to access present” (interview to Flavia Costa, trad. Susana Scramim, in Revista do Departamento de Psicologia – Universidade Federal Fluminense, Niterói, v. 18 - n. 1, 131-136, Jan./Jun. 2006, 132, translated by the author). However, the aspects in which Agamben follows Foucault's method and the ones he does not were never very clear. This situation seems to change with the edition of Agamben's most extensive and explicit texts on method, *Signatura Rerum. Sul Metodo* (2008, italian edition). The goal of this article is to identify the points of intersection between their methods and some points in which they differ.*

Keywords: Philosophy, Political Philosophy, Social Philosophy, Giorgio Agamben, Michel Foucault, Archaeological Method, Archaeology of Knowledge, homo sacer, Signatura Rerum

The subject of this paper is a preliminary investigation concerning the use of the foucaultian archaeological method by Giorgio Agamben². The design of the archaeological method by Michel Foucault in his works *Folie et déraison, Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (1961)³, *Naissance de la clinique. Une archéologie du regard médical* (1963)⁴, *Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (1966)⁵ and *L'Archéologie du savoir* (1969)⁶, among others may be not fully clear until today and has been the subject of many misunderstandings from the very beginning, many of which were pointed by Foucault himself.

¹ Professor at Universidade Federal Fluminense.

² In this first moment, we try a comparison having in mind the archaeological method as designed by Michel Foucault in *L'Archéologie du savoir* (1969), published in English as *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London: Tavistock, 1972. We do so, because this book has method as its main subject, but we intend to develop this investigation into asking if archaeological method may have changed in any aspects, in later Foucault works.

³ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Tavistock, 1965.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things, an archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

⁶ See Foucault (note 1). The pages quoted in this paper are from the brazilian edition, Michel Foucault, *Arqueologia do Saber*, Petrópolis: Vozes, 1972, and will be quoted just as AS, followed by the pages number. All the translations to English of sources not quoted in that language where made by the author of this paper.

In a couple of passages, Agamben establishes the connection of his works and Foucault's ones. We quote one of them:

My method is archaeological and paradigmatic in a sense very close to that of Foucault, but not completely coincident with it. It is a matter of, before the dichotomies that structurize our culture, going beyond the exceptions that have produced them, although not to find a chronologically originary state, but, on the contrary, to be able to understand the situation in which we find ourselves. The archaeology is, in this sense, the only way of access to present. However, going beyond the binary logics means, above all, to be able to more and more transform the dichotomies in bipolarities, the substantial oppositions in a field of forces covered by polar tensions which are present in each one of its points, without the possibility of stablishing precise demarcation lines. Logics of the field against logics of the substance. This means, among other things, that between A and A a third element is given, which cannot be, however, a new homogeneous element, similar the former ones: it is not anything but the neutralization and transformation of the two others. This means, finally, to work by paradigms, neutralizing the false dichotomy between universal and particular. A paradigm (the Greek term means simply “example”) is a particular phenomenon that, being so, worths for every case of the same gender e acquires, thus, the capacity of building a more ample problematic set. (...) In this sense, in my work, I used constantly paradigms: the *homo sacer* is not only an obscure figure of the archaic Roman Law, but also the cipher to understand the contemporary biopolitics. The same can be said of the “muslim” in Auschwitz and of the State of Exception.⁷

As seen, Agamben does not claim to simply follow Foucault's method, but to work in a way “very close” to it. It is not a very clear statement but we intend to try to identify at least at some points how both methods might be connected and to raise some questions about it. In order to do this we should first try to reunite the main characteristics of Foucault's method. After *Folie et déraison*, *Naissance de la clinique* and *Les mots et les choses*, the main works in which the archaeological method was tried and employed, not always in the same way, for it shifted here and there at each new venture, *L'Archéologie du savoir* was the work in which Foucault tried to elaborate just on his method. It carries the advantage of being written after the three other mentioned works, so Foucault would be able not only to develop explanations on a method he had already been using and perfecting for some time, but also to clarify some misunderstandings about it and also the way it changed along the way. These are the reasons why I choose this work as the main source about Foucault's archaeological method.

⁷ Interview of Giorgio Agamben by Flavia Costa, trans. Susana Scramim, in *Revista do Departamento de Psicologia* – Universidade Federal Fluminense, Niterói, v. 18 - n. 1 p. 131-136, Jan./Jun. 2006, 132.

On the introduction of AS, Foucault identifies a major trend in history as a science, one that was already felt for some decades, as Foucault says, the trend to focus on long periods of time. Foucault is pointing to the way groups of historians as that know as the *Annales School* tried, in France, to shift from the so called positivist attitude in history, marked by the description of events in a linear causal succession, to the goal of observing the medium and long term evolution of civilization, neglecting events that would now be seen just as surface disturbances, to use an expression of Georges Duby. In the words of Foucault, “as far as one descends to the most deep basis, the cuts are gradually larger”, revealing “histories almost immobile to the eye”⁸. A new time, a new temporality in history was being invented. However, the history of ideas was experimenting other tendencies, according to Foucault. Traditionally dominated by the idea of the progress of conscience or of the rationality or of the human thought, in a linear and progressive evolution, this discipline was facing itself with “different series, that juxtapose themselves, succeed or cross each other, without the possibility of being reduced to a linear scheme”⁹. The scales of time that were unfolding here were brief, not long. The problem was not anymore one of “tradition and trace, but of cut and limit”¹⁰.

These shifts, both in history and in the history of ideas would be seen as an effect of a change in the way these disciplines faced the documents, not anymore as mere memory but as a matter for “recognizing in deep what men had been”, unfolding “a mass of elements that should be isolated, reunited, made relevant and where relations should be established and sets built”¹¹. Another consequence of this shift would be that discontinuity would find a place in historical disciplines, not being seen anymore as the stigma the historian should always try to avoid. The third consequence would be the fall of the idea of a “global history”, as the “reconstruction of the form of the evolution of a civilization, the material or spiritual principle of a society, the common meaning to all phenomenon in a period of time, the law that explains its cohesion – what is metaphorically called the 'face' of an epoch”¹². This conception of a Global History would make way for that of a General History, which would have the task of “determining what form of relation can legitimaly described between this different series, what vertical system they may form, what are, from ones to the others, the game of correlations and dominances; of what effect may be the displacements, the different temporalities, the several permanencies; in which different sets can certain elements appear

⁸ AS, 9.

⁹ AS, 15.

¹⁰ AS, 12.

¹¹ AS, 14.

¹² AS, 17.

simultaneously; in brief, not only what series but what 'series of series', or, in other terms, what 'pictures' can be constructed"¹³. The task would not be to display all phenomenon around a single center, but to unfold the space of a *dispersion*.

All this would make an *epistemological mutation of history* in confrontation with what the philosophy of history had been, a struggle to give a sense to history, a *thelos*, to encounter the continuous evolution of the same principles, of the same origin, one of the faces of a system of thought that makes "the human conscience the originary subject of every coming-to-be, of every practice"¹⁴. This themes are present since the XIXth century, under different forms: saving "the sovereignty of subject and the twin figures of anthropology and humanism"¹⁵ from the descentration operated by the historical analysis of production relations, economic determinations and classes struggle of Marx; or by nietzschean genealogy; or by the unveiling of the laws of desire by psychoanalysis.

Finally, at the end of his introduction, Foucault affirms that the three previous books, mentioned above, inscribe themselves in an enterprise by which "one tries to measure the mutations that take place in history domains"¹⁶, adding three forewords: this is not an attempt to transfer to the field of history a structuralistic method; nor to use the categories of cultural totalities; and it is marked by the attempt of a method of historical analysis which is released and exempt from the anthropological theme.

At this point, Foucault also tries to clarify some misunderstandings that had – and still have – surrounded his previous books, such as the confessed attempt to use structural analysis in *Naissance de la Clinique*. However, the most important one seems to be the statement that *Les mots et les choses*, due to lack of methodological outline "allowed that one believed in analyses in terms of cultural totality"¹⁷.

Foucault defines his enterprise as a historical analysis of discourse, in which categories such as tradition, influence, development, evolution, mentality, spirit, author, work (*oeuvre*), origin are suspended, not definitively rejected, but suspended. All these images of the idea of historical continuity must be suspended in order to liberate discourse as difference, as event, as irruption, as singularity. Discourse shall not be reconstructed by psychological interpretation or linguistic analysis. The task is to find "other forms of regularities, other types of relations"¹⁸, relations between enoncements¹⁹ (*enoncés*), relations between groups

¹³ AS, 18.

¹⁴ AS, 21.

¹⁵ *Idem, ibidem.*

¹⁶ AS, 24-25.

¹⁷ *Idem, ibidem.*

¹⁸ AS, 41.

of enouncements thus established, relations between enouncements or groups of enouncements and events of an entirely different order (technical, economical, political, social).

To establish these new relations, however, some decisions are required and criteria are requested. “As far as conditions are defined clearly, it might be legitimate to constitute, from correctly described relations, discursive sets which would not be arbitrary, although they remained invisible so far”²⁰. A region is chosen for trying this, on the basis that the chosen region might present the possibility of numerous, dense relations, as well as easy to describe. The first approach to try the method, that's all, and the choice is the region of humanities, or the sciences of man.

The second chapter of AS focuses on the so called discursive formations, which would be defined by a set of enouncements. However, which is the criterium to group enouncements in a so called discursive formation? Some attempts are made: the community of object; a common form or a common type of development, style (in a sense close to the one this notion is employed in literature); the use concepts in common; the persistence of the same themes. None of these criteria would be enough to explain the sense of unity assigned to large families of enouncements such as *the economy* or *the grammar*. Foucault affirms to be involved by sets of enouncements which can't fit in a “logical architecture”, that “are not organized as a progressively deductive building”, neither “as the work of a collective subject”. Foucault does not try to “isolate islands of coherence” or to “retrace chains of inference” or even to “build charts of differences”, but to study “forms of partition”, of distribution, “systems of dispersion”²¹.

At the end all this criteria will be combined, but also twisted, for what is being sought is nor coherence or identity, neither difference or contradiction, but certain kinds of relations, of a way all these enouncements function together. “In case it was possible to describe, among a certain number of enouncements, such a dispersion system, in case a regularity could be defined (an order, correlations, positions and functions, transformations) among the objects, the types of enunciation, the concepts, the thematical choices, one would be able to say, by convention, that this is a *discursive formation* (...).”²²

¹⁹ I try to translate the word used by Foucault in French, *enoncé*, and all the efforts Foucault made to distinguish it from proposition or phrase. It has been translated to English before as statement, but I find this translation too close to the notion of phrase. I am not sure the chosen translation is the best one and anyone might propose a better solution.

²⁰ AS, 41.

²¹ AS, 51.

²² *Idem, ibidem.*

Foucault declares to be interested in identifying a) the way different discourses can be shaped from analogous rules (archaeological isomorphism); b) the way these rules function, the way they work, being this fashion the same in the different discourses analyzed or not (archaeological model); c) the way different concepts in different discourses may occupy an analogous position in its respective positivity, in its discursive building (archaeological isotopies)²³; d) the way the same notion can play a different role in different discourses, like the notion of evolution, or origin, for grammar and natural sciences (archaeological distance); e) the way different positivities can relate by subordination or complementarity²⁴ (archaeological correlations)²⁵.

Especial emphasis is put in one of the traces that would make it possible to identify or to propose a discursive formation: the submission of the enouncements to the same rules of formation, conditions to which they are submitted and that work as a condition of possibility for them to appear as discourse. These *rules of formation* would retain vividly Foucault's attention. In fact they are one of the points of contact between the so called archaeology of knowledge period and the genealogy of power period. They coincide with what was already called as historical *a priori* in *Les mots et les choses* and will be again in AS be called this way²⁶.

The fact that the rules of formation in each given discursive formation are named as something *a priori* refer to the fact that these rules function as a condition of possibility for the appearance of discourses as so, but why would them be called historical. Foucault states that the study of these rules may help us understand that “history may be something other than a absolutely extrinsic contingency, it is not a necessity of the form which develops its own dialectics”. This is to say that Foucault does not see history as the develop of any kind of previously given form, being this the kantian *a priori* forms of the transcendental subject or the gradual and progressive development of reason, or of an origin, which is to say there is no *télos* in history, but the formation rules are a “purely empiric figure”, “characterizing a discursive practice”²⁷. He doesn't even admit a changing nature of a subject, a variating essence that conditions history in each era, a changing transcendental form. It is in the field of absolute empiricity that Foucault places it.

²³ As Foucault tries to show in *Truth and Juridical Forms*, when he claims to be possible to identify isotopies when one compares ancient greek philosophy and ancient greek law.

²⁴ Like those exhaustively posed by Foucault, between Criminal Law and Psychiatry, for instance.

²⁵ See AS, 197-198.

²⁶ AS, 158.

²⁷ AS, 159.

A set of enouncements may be called a discursive formation if it is possible to show that “they all derive (despite their sometimes extreme diversity, despite their dispersion along time) from the same set of relations”²⁸. It is not the same to say that they express the same relations, for their diversity is given. Foucault does not talk about a character of discourse itself, its linguistic nature or its logical structure²⁹, but about rules of formation.

Hence the necessary relation of an enouncement and material institutions³⁰, what is to say instances of power. Thus, a discursive formation corresponds to a *discursive practice*: “a set of anonymous and historical rules, always determined in space and time, which defined in a given period and to a determined social, economic, geographic or linguistic area the conditions of use of enunciative function”³¹. The sets of enouncements or the discursive formations, together with the discursive practices that correspond to each of them, included the material institutions that actualize these practices, this wider set of enouncements, as events, and things, as practical formations and material institutions, will be named *archives*³².

It must be pointed out that although a discursive practice is described above by Foucault as “determined in space and time” and as related “to a given period” of time, these periods are not determined in length or scale. Furthermore, a discursive practice conditions a determined social, economic, geographic *or* linguistic area. The fact that Foucault uses an “or” here, instead of an “and” is very important. We are not dealing with structures that although empirical, reign above every domain of life in a given period of time. This is the misunderstanding that Foucault recognized to make possible with the edition of *Les mots et les choses*, when he says that due to lack of methodological outline this work “allowed that one believed in analyses in terms of cultural totality”³³. We quote a key passage on that:

Nothing would be more false than seeing the analysis of discursive formations as an attempt for a totalitarian periodization: from a certain moment on e during a certain time, everyone would think the same way, despite the superficial differences, would say the same, by means of a polymorphic vocabulary, and would produce a kind of great discourse that could be covered indifferently in every direction. On the contrary, archaeology describes a level of enunciative homogeneity that has its own temporal cut and which does not carry with it all the other forms of identity and of differences that can be identified in language; and in this level establishes an order, hierarchies and a whole net that exclude a massive and

²⁸ AS, 85.

²⁹ About the efforts of Foucault to establish the distinction between the enouncement and a proposition (logical) or a phrase (linguistical), see. AS, 99-109.

³⁰ AS, 129.

³¹ AS, 147.

³² AS, 160.

³³ Foucault (note 16).

amorphous synchrony, given once and for all. In the confuse unities that are called “eras”, it [archaeology] raises “enunciative periods”, with their special characters, which are articulated with each other but can be confused with each other, in the time of their concepts, in their theoretical phrases, formalization stages and grades of linguistic evolution.³⁴

It is true that Foucault takes great interest in the moments when a new discursive formation arises, the rarest and most important moments for archaeology³⁵, but these events does not correspond to a culture shift or to a change of a civilization style, for the discursive formation is not seen as the spirit or the face of a time, of an era, but as a specific set of relations in a certain field or area, which changes are not necessarily synchronic, coherent and convergent with those of other fields or areas.

Foucault also outlines the possibility of other archaeologies, besides an archaeology of knowledge, suggesting that the method might be used to produce an archaeology of ethics or an archaeology of political knowledge³⁶.

In short, the great enterprise Foucault tries to put in movement is that of depriving history of every transcendental forms imposed on it and to claim that history can be thought as a fully immanent movement, made of events, singularities, in which difference may rise.

All this having been said, we must turn to Agamben.

We have already quoted a passage where he claims his method to be “archaeological and paradigmatic in a sense very close to that of Foucault, but not completely coincident with it”³⁷. The first thing that catches anyone's attention is the fact that the word “paradigmatic” was not used by Foucault to describe his method. So in what sense a paradigmatic method can be close to Foucault's one?

In *Signatura Rerum. Sul metodo* (2008)³⁸, Agamben makes it clearer. Agamben claims that the efforts made by Foucault to avoid the term *paradigm* are due to his concerns that his ideas would not be confused with the thought of Thomas Kuhn. Agamben quotes some of the passages of an interview to Fontana and Pasquino (1979) in which Foucault explicitly says about the notion of discursive formations that “It was confused too often with the systematicity, theoretical form or something like the paradigm”³⁹.

³⁴ AS, 183.

³⁵ AS, 209.

³⁶ AS, 233-237.

³⁷ Agamben (note 7).

³⁸ The pages quoted in this paper are from the original work by Giorgio Agamben, *Signatura Rerum. Sul metodo*. Roma: Bollati Boringhieri, 2008, and it will be mentioned just as SR. It was published in English as *The Signature of All Things: on Method*. New York: Zone Books, 2009.

³⁹ Michel Foucault, *Dits et Écrits*. Paris: Gallimard, 1994, tome III, p.144 *apud* SR, 16.

The subject of this paper is not to show why Foucault's and Kuhn's works differ, according to Foucault himself and with Agamben, who claims:

The *Archéologie du Savoir* has been read as a manifest for historiographic discontinuism. If this definition – which Foucault contested many times – is at a certain level correct, it is certain that in this book he [Foucault] seems to take interest, above all, in what allows contexts and sets to be constituted, in the positive existence of “figures” and series. However this contexts are produced according a very peculiar epistemological model, that is neither coincident with the one commonly used in historical research, nor with the kuhnian paradigm, and so that we will identify.⁴⁰

Agamben is very brief though in outlining this peculiar foucaultian paradigmatic method. It would consist in isolating a paradigmatic figure or case, paradigmatic in the sense of exemplar, but this example is also taken as a “singular object that, being worth for all other objects of the same type, defines the intelligibility of the set, of which it is a part and that it constitutes, at the same time”⁴¹.

Agamben seems to choose the Panopticon as a first example of paradigm in Foucault's work, but he quickly adds the *grand enfermement*, the confession, the inquiry, the examination, the care of oneself. “And so many other historical phenomena that are studied as paradigms that come from a very vast problematic context that, at the same time, they constitute and make intelligible – and this is the specificity of Foucault's research regarding historiography.”⁴²

Agamben states that the *homo sacer*, the concentration camps, the *Muselmann* and the State of Exception are paradigms in this sense, but also the trinitary *oikonomia* and acclamation. However, one aspect, at least, calls our attention. If we look at the way some of these paradigms are shaped by Agamben, we are driven to take a look at very long periods of time. We would have to find a connection between the ancient figure of the *homo sacer* and the contemporary phenomenon of bare life, or between the roman acclamation of an Emperor and the mass media processes for consensus formation in contemporary democracies, or to a long genealogy of the trinitary *oikonomia*, since Aristotle, passing by stoicism, neoplatonism, gnosticism, Aquinas, to arrive at modern liberal economy.

Of course, it is not just a matter of finding similarities or analogies.

⁴⁰ SR, 18.

⁴¹ SR., 19.

⁴² *Idem, ibidem.*

In *Il Regno e la Gloria. Per una genealogia teologica dell'economia e del governo* (2007)⁴³, specially in the chapter named *The Providential Machine*, Agamben specifically confronts the Foucault's thesis of modern government origins, which according to Foucault, as is widely known, lays its roots in pastoral power. The secularization of religious pastoral power would be the source of modern government. For Foucault, the sixteenth century is the landmark of a shift between the medieval conception of pastoral power to the modern conception of a God that does not reigns over the world directly, but only by means of certain principles or laws, the separation of Reign and Government. For Agamben, Foucault committed a methodological error when he ignored the theological texts, loosing the possibility of finding a deeper continuity in the theological and metaphysical origins of modern government in the trinitary *oikonomia*⁴⁴.

So, there is not just analogy between theological trinitary *oikonomia* and the modern relations between economy and politics, but a deep genealogical thesis.

In this sense the phrase pronounced by Leland De la Durantaye may have more deep consequences than the ones he identifies: “(...) it is Schmitt's political theology that lies at the heart of Agamben's ongoing *Homo Sacer* project”⁴⁵. It seems that the schmittian thesis that there is a theological source of the central categories of modern politics, secularized theological concepts, has a deeper impact in Agamben's work that one would see at a first glance.

One or two misunderstandings can be however excluded. What Agamben is doing is not an attempt to reveal something about the essence or nature of man or of history. If he proposes that things have happened and are happening this way, to be coherent with some of the most valuable premisses put by Foucault, it is something we can only empirically know. There is no authorization in Agamben's work to see this as an end developing in history, or deep necessary forces of life. The archeological method, with all its empiricity, “is the only way of access to present”⁴⁶ and the only hints on the future we can get, still, fortunately or not, open to difference and singularity. As Deleuze says, in the appendix of his book on Foucault, concerning the death of man, we hope that the new form that is to come is not worse than its predecessors⁴⁷.

⁴³ Giorgio Agamben, *Il Regno e la Gloria. Per una genealogia teologica dell'economia e del governo*, Vicenza: Neri Poza (2007), also published in English as Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory. For a theological genealogy of economy and government*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2011.

⁴⁴ *Il Regno e la Gloria, op.cit.*, 123-129.

⁴⁵ Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: a critical introduction*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009, 211.

⁴⁶ Agamben (note 7).

⁴⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*. Paris: Ed. de Minuit, 140-141.

Address:

Luís Antônio Cunha Ribeiro

Rua Professor Gabizo 152 ap. 901

20271-061

Rio de Janeiro – RJ – Brazil

advogados@superig.com.br