

# Foucault and political anthropology

Marc Abèlès

---

## Introduction

For many anthropologists Michel Foucault's works have become essential reading. However, we must admit that his writings have been especially influential on North American side of the Atlantic, where Foucault enjoys a good reputation in the classes taught in anthropology departments and American universities. In France, on the contrary, for a long time anthropologists have regarded the philosopher with a certain degree of suspicion. It is worthwhile to reflect upon this difference in his reception and to recontextualise it in relation to two distinct intellectual traditions.

Whereas in France anthropology has developed in a relationship of mistrusting philosophy, in the USA the development of critical anthropology in the 1980s, was marked by a strong interest in contemporary philosophy, in particular the Frankfurt School, and the poststructuralists, in particular Derrida and Foucault, and more recently Agamben. Furthermore, it is especially interesting to analyse the way in which American anthropologists have made use of the concept of power, as it is used by Foucault. I show here how a reflection on the position of anthropologists and their authority as authors, intersects with Foucauldian inter-

rogations of power and the notion of discipline. At another level I study the impact of the Foucault's analyses on bio-politics, which are today common points of reference in American anthropology and also influence the works of French anthropologists. In conclusion, I reflect on the prospects opened up through reading Foucault for political anthropology, in terms of both theoretical developments and field practices.

Marc Abèlès is Professor of Anthropology at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, Head of Research at the *CNRS*, Head of the Laboratory for the Anthropology of Social Institutions and Organisations (EHESS-CNRS). His field of research is the anthropology of politics and institutions. His recent works include: *Les Nouveaux riches. Un ethnologue dans la Silicon Valley* (The nouveau riche: an ethnologist in Silicon Valley) (Abèlès 2002), *Anthropologie de l'État* (The anthropology of the state) (Abèlès 2005), *L'échec en politique* (Failure in politics) (Abèlès 2005), *Politique de la survie* (The politics of survival) (Abèlès 2006) and *Anthropologie de la globalisation* (The anthropology of globalisation) (Abèlès 2008).  
Email: mabeles@mac.com

## The relation between anthropology and philosophy

### American anthropology and the denial of philosophy

To speak about the acceptance or rejection of Foucault's work in the field of anthropology is first of all to posit the more general question of the relationship between anthropology and philosophy. Contrary to a simplistic vision that would oppose two kinds of questioning, one shaped by fundamental interrogations of the nature and ends of humanity, and the other based on the requirement of being scientific and focusing on the knowledge of human societies, we must recognise that for a long time anthropology and philosophy have

developed a complex and ambiguous relationship. As I have already argued elsewhere (Abélès 2005), one of the major problematics for anthropology at its inception: the origin of the state, and beyond this; the great division between the civilized and the primitive it introduced, stems from a critical reading of philosophical works.

In one of the founding texts of political anthropology, *Ancient law*, Henry Sumner Maine devotes an entire chapter to discussing philosophical theories of the state of nature and the social contract, and engages in a thorough refutation of Rousseauesque theses, before introducing an opposition between social organisation, in which kinship relations are dominant, and political organisation, founded upon territory and property. The division Maine introduces has had some positive effects. It resulted in a very fruitful body of research on kinship and made it possible to draw attention to the strength of politics in non-state societies. However, his approach also reflects an obsession centred on the division between “us” – the moderns, capable of developing objective knowledge, and “them” – the societies that are the object of our scientific enquiries and relegated to a kind of primitive and exotic otherness.

As we see, there is in this rejection of philosophical discourse from the outset, the concomitant assumption of a philosophy, albeit implicit, which assigns a place to scholars and one to the peoples who will be their subject matter, and who will provide scientists with their living laboratory. It is not coincidental that Radcliffe-Brown, one of the authorities in the Anglo-Saxon school of thought, defined his discipline as the “natural science of human society”. By doing so he marks off a territory to be occupied and saved from the magicians of speculation. Philosophy and the debates it has given rise to can only introduce unacceptable disorder in a world in which henceforth facts must reign as masters of the universe.

This specification of anthropology as a natural science is written in the preface of “a convenient reference book”, according to its authors, Evans-Pritchard and Fortes (1940, p.1), on African political systems. Like Radcliffe-Brown’s work, this major work from 1940 marks an essential milestone in the development of political anthropology. While in their introduc-

tion the authors develop a few ideas about political philosophy, their aim, however, is to immediately disqualify this approach, giving preference to the idea at the expense of realities:

We have not found that the theories of political philosophers have helped us to understand the societies we have studied and we consider them to be of little scientific value, because their conclusions are rarely formulated in terms of behaviour observed or are not likely to be verified according to these criteria. (Evans-Pritchard and Fortes 1964, pp.3–4)

Although philosophers have attempted to support their theories by using the data available concerning primitive societies and customs, they did so at a moment in which these data were still very limited. Therefore, anthropologists must “avoid making reference to the works of political philosophers” (Evans-Pritchard and Fortes 1964, p.3).

The diagnosis is clear: philosophy is taken to be an epistemological obstacle that hinders the development of political anthropology. One might consider certain philosophers, such as Montesquieu in particular, as distant forerunners; but the anthropological approach implies in its very principles a break with philosophical discourse. At least, this is what can be derived from the works of Evans-Pritchard and Fortes, and their disciples. This point of view has prevailed ever since, to such an extent that it influences our very conception of the history of anthropology.

### **The suspicion of philosophy in French anthropology**

In the same way, the denial of philosophy seems to be at the very core of anthropological discourse. Lévi-Strauss himself, who, as we know, began his career by training as a philosopher, has always been mistrustful of his contemporary philosophers. Whereas he expressed real curiosity with regard to the development of the contemporary sciences, even working with mathematicians and linguists, the least we can say is that he did not seem very concerned with the works of philosophers.

At the height of structuralism, the very different ideas of Barthes, Foucault, Lacan and Lévi-Strauss were hastily lumped together. It would be an understatement to say that the latter was irritated by this grouping. He was always

careful to express the specificity of his approach. Furthermore, he makes no allusion to Foucault in his writings. As someone who had taken his courses (he was the supervisor of my doctoral thesis), I could observe his suspicion with regard to philosophical statements. Whereas he did agree to engage in a discussion with Paul Ricoeur, he never deigned to comment on the text that Derrida wrote about the chapter in *Tristes tropiques* (Sad tropics) entitled “*La leçon d’écriture*” (The writing lesson) (Derrida 1967, pp.145–202). With respect to Lévi-Strauss’ influence on the development of French anthropology, philosophers in general, and Foucault in particular, were considered off limits. Although many anthropologists had previously studied philosophy, the very idea was to break with speculation and engage in the painstaking task of collecting data by going out into the field. The field represented the means of gaining access to the concrete, and was also a kind of rite of passage in which one was supposed to purify oneself of dominant ethnocentrism.

In this context, philosophy appeared to be at best an unnecessary luxury, and at worst a web of inadequate biases. It is of no surprise then that there is no allusion to either Foucault or Derrida in the most accomplished works of the post-Lévi-Strauss generation that, paradoxically, had lived during the age of triumphant structuralism and might have attended courses by Foucault and Derrida. Must one speak of anathema with regard to philosophy? In any case, it was in the name of the scientific nature of the anthropological project that the disjunction occurred. Ethnography, comparative studies, and the ambition of creating a science of the mind: the programme was sufficiently exalted to justify accepting a good dose of positivism and sacrificing ancient philosophical conjectures.

### **The crisis in American anthropology in the 1970s and the discovery of Foucault**

During this same period, American anthropology, long-dominated by the proponents of culturalism, was entering a crisis that was both intellectual and political. In addition to the fact that the concepts that had ensured the success of the discipline were becoming obsolete, beginning with the very notion of culture, the foundations

of which had been shaken by the critiques formulated by structural anthropology and Marxist theory, there was an increasingly critical reflection on the very practice of anthropology. The point of departure of this reflection was the context of the Vietnam War and the fact that ethnography could have been used for military ends and that certain anthropologists had been exploited by the government. This situation brought about a profound interrogation: first with respect to the notion of objectivity and the criteria accepted until that time in terms of how scientific the discipline was, second with respect to the very conditions of ethnographic practice.

If we refer to the debates at that time we can point to two distinct areas of enquiry: on the one hand, a discussion that developed around the theme of anthropology and imperialism in the American Anthropological Association, which led to the production of texts that had a considerable international impact (published in French in Copans, 1975); on the other hand, a body of epistemological reflections on ethnographic description (Geertz 1973) and the position of the anthropologist as an observer and author (Clifford and Marcus 1986, Geertz 1988).

It was therefore at the end of the 1970s that a profound upheaval occurred in American anthropology, which was characterised by a contestation of the presuppositions underlying the discipline and by a search for new theoretical perspectives and new fields of enquiry. At the same time Foucault arrived on the academic scene: conferences, translations and the publication of selected articles rapidly made him a name.

One of the people who introduced Foucault to the USA was none other than Paul Rabinow, who was himself an anthropologist and a former student of Geertz. He was the editor of the *Foucault reader* (1984), one of the most widely used texts in American universities, and he wrote a book on Foucault in collaboration with Dreyfus (1984). Back from his first field experience in Morocco, Rabinow (1977) compiled a set of reflections on ethnographic practices. His critique focused in particular on the traditional conception of the field as isolated and disconnected from a context that was strongly marked by colonialism, and the ambiguous relations that linked ethnographers to their informants.

Rabinow's works fall into a broader current of thought that contributed to the renewal of anthropology in the USA in the 1980s. This current enacted a radical calling into question of what Geertz (1988) denounced as the authority of the ethnographer. This authority was said to be based above all on experience ("I was there"), and the ethnographic text attempts to make the reader identify with the point of view of the observer-participant. This initial takeover of power forbids any kind of reflection on the conditions of the experiment in which the theorist-investigator is involved. Most often, the latter takes on a modest posture, pretending to remain completely in the background behind the data collected in the field. This posture explains a certain style of ethnographic writing, which goes back and forth between generalities and concrete examples. The conditions in which the ethnographic experiments take place are at no time called into question. This explains why the subject of the Santa Fe seminar, which in 1984 brought together Clifford, Marcus, Rabinow and other young anthropologists, was ethnography as a literary genre.

Refusing to accept anthropology's claims that it was a science, the works stemming from this seminar (Clifford and Marcus 1986) questioned the authority of the ethnographer-author. As Rabinow would later write:

*Writing cultures* did not present a worldview. It did something different – it articulated an emergent problematization. The concept of problematization comes from Michel Foucault, who defined it as follows: "The development of a given into a question, the transformation of a group of obstacles and difficulties into problems to which diverse solutions will attempt to produce a response". (Rabinow 1999, p.307)

It is not by chance that he refers to Foucault in this citation. From the 1980s onwards the French philosopher interested the new generation of American anthropologists for two reasons. He had masterfully shown the historical and relative separation of science and literature and at another level, he never stopped asking about truth and its relationship to power, developing Nietzsche's line of thought on this matter. *Writing cultures* falls within the subversive perspective particular to the genealogical

undertaking advocated by Nietzsche and brought to the fore by Foucault.

When they discovered Foucault, it was his description of discursive strategies in their relationship with power that particularly intrigued American anthropologists. At this time they could read an anthology of Foucault's texts and his interviews on the relationships between power and knowledge. It is this meeting between the reflections of Foucault as an archaeologist and the preoccupations of anthropologists, who were more and more doubtful about positivism, which prevailed in the world of knowledge that characterised this period.

In the USA the supporters of new anthropology were preoccupied with finding a new epistemological basis by modifying in some way the focus of ethnography, even if this meant toppling the figure of the scholarly scientist that had imposed itself in this discipline. The discovery of Derrida also played an important role in the enterprise of destabilising ethnographic orthodoxy.

This process was not without contradictions, since Geertz, for example, who was at the origins of the critical current in anthropology, refers in the first place to the hermeneutic tradition, especially to the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. Geertz's slogan: "treat culture as text" implies, as its correlate, the idea that the text is above all a material object that is open to interpretation. Meanwhile, Derrida assailed the notion of interpretation, which according to him, falls within the pure tradition of western metaphysics. While allusions to Derrida and Foucault were more and more common, anthropologists did not for that reason attempt to define the relationships linking them to their philosophical texts.

One can argue that in the 1980s a certain style of relationship developed between American anthropologists and "continental" philosophy: a referential and rather reverential relationship. Rare are the texts that do not allude to Foucault (generally in the introduction). This does not mean that these texts truly engage with his ideas. This is also valid for Derrida: the tendency in his case was to assimilate deconstruction to a method of reading, even if this meant adopting a positivist point of view, while veiling the subversive nature of his writing.

Instead of dwelling here on the misunderstandings stemming from this problematic

reception of Foucault or Derrida, let us remember one positive point: anthropology had opened up to self-critique. Deleuze wrote: “Foucault’s general principle is that any form is the product of relation between forces” (Deleuze 1986, p.131). It seems that it was, above all, this dialectic of power and form that attracted the attention of anthropologists who were concerned about carrying out a self-critique of the discursive productions emerging from their own discipline.

A work published at the time by Marcus and Fischer (1986), two of the pioneers from Santa Fe, is a good example of this desire to give anthropology a critical dimension, because it shows how the concept of culture and the ethnographies that stem from it have become instruments propping up imperialism. From the first pages, these authors support the critique of orientalism formulated by E. Said (1979), and throughout their text they show the necessity of reviving anthropology’s critical function. This requirement implies the development of a reflexive ethnography, which in its own discourse takes into account the conditions in which its object of study is constructed.

It also requires the implementation of a critique of our own culture, through strategies of “defamiliarisation”. This process will bridge the great gap between Others (exotic peoples, the objects of ethnography), and Us (westerners, scientists and scholars). The stakes were clear: we must do away with the conception of the science of cultures deemed to be outdated, and redefine anthropology’s field of investigation, which henceforth had an explicitly critical aim. In this context, the reference to authors such as Baudrillard, Benjamin, Bourdieu, Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard, and interest in works stemming from post-colonial studies, like those of Bahbba, Chatterjee, Said and Spivak, contributed to reconfiguring the domain of an anthropology that did not hesitate to invoke a postmodernist perspective by referring to D. Harvey (1990) and Jameson (1984).

## The French critique of power and the state in the 1970s

This opening up of American anthropology to epistemological and philosophical interrogations did not have much impact in France. At

this time only a few texts by Geertz had been translated into French. Clifford’s critical reflections on ethnographic writing had a certain impact, but for the rest, there was a tendency to make fun of the way in which American anthropology was drifting off course, which was labelled in a intentionally pejorative way, post-modern. Curiously, just when the works of Foucault and French poststructuralists were starting to have a considerable amount of influence on American anthropology, they had almost no impact on this discipline in France. Does this mean that there was no noticeable development in anthropology in France? Or had it simply remained aloof, insensitive to any philosophical interrogation?

Paradoxically, just when Foucault’s major texts were appearing, French anthropologists, (like Balandier, Izard, Clastres, Augé, Terray and Godelier) were fascinated by the question of power. However, there is not the slightest trace of controversy or dialogue with the author of *La Volonté de savoir* (The will to knowledge). French anthropology preferred to graze in its own fields and invoke the concepts it had fashioned for itself. On their part philosophers, in particular Deleuze and Guattari, but also Lefort and Gauchet, were making use of the works of anthropologists in their reflections on politics. Even before American anthropology went in the direction described above, it is in France that one finds the most brilliantly argued denunciations of the dishonest compromises that ethnology made with colonialism and its essentialisation of the “primitive” and the “archaic”, which had contributed to losing sight of the historical and political realities in which ethnographic field work takes place.

Here again, however, there is no allusion to Foucault’s investigations on “systems of truth”, the production of knowledge or discursive modes. Anthropology is based on a simple principle: through their investigations, it is possible for anthropologists to uncover a truth that eludes the social players analysed, because they are caught up in necessarily limited representations of reality. Whether it be in Lévi-Strauss’s reflections on the concepts of model and structure, the reading proposed by Godelier of Marxist analyses of fetishism, or Bourdieu’s *Esquisse d’une théorie de la pratique* (Outline of a theory of practice), there is no

calling into question of the telos of a science of human beings that is oriented to a truth ideal.

If, at the beginning of the 1980s French and American anthropologists converged in their critique of imperialism and its effects and agreed on the necessity of questioning the place of the observer, a separation occurred, which was largely due to the impact in the USA of Foucault's reflections on the order of discourse and the imbrications of power and knowledge. Subsequently, the gap continued to widen, to the extent that the reference to Lévi-Strauss was relegated to the background in the USA and replaced by an allusion to poststructuralists, whereas in France anthropology was becoming more rigid and seemed to be attached to defending its territory and its traditional subjects of enquiry (kinship, symbolism and ritual).

However, the question of power in the terms used by the author of *Surveiller et punir* (Discipline and punish) could not have left political anthropology indifferent. First of all, Foucault clearly states that: "An analysis, made in terms of power, must not assume the sovereignty of the state, the form of law, or the overall unity of a domination are given at the outset; rather, these are only the terminal forms power takes" (Foucault 1976, p.120). Before Foucault political anthropology had contributed to de-reifying politics by showing that too much focus on the state had resulted in concealing the actual diversity of the figures of power. In my *Anthropologie de l'Etat* (Anthropology of the state) (Abélès 1990) I point to this convergence, which does not seem to have caught the attention of other anthropologists at this time.

In addition, Foucault insisted on the need to ask the question of how power is exercised. To think of power in action, as a way of acting upon actions (Foucault 2000, p.341), was also to challenge the traditional tools of political theories, which had "recourse only to ways of thinking about power based on legal models, that is: What legitimates power? Or did they have recourse to institutional models, that is: What is the state?" (Foucault 2000, p.327). That meant delegating and deinstitutionalising our approach to politics. This approach seemed to be very appealing to me when I was attempting to explore in Europe a universe that seemed to be at first sight wary of a mode of analysis created to think about politics in societies considered to

be stateless. The research we carried out on political practices, in contexts as different as the framework of a village and the European Union, has the common thread of attempting to define how power functions, its ramifications and networks. It was essential to adopt a deliberately non-institutional approach to institutions.

A central question in this debate was that of governing human beings, which led us to a theme dear to Foucault: the art of governing; that is the practices through which we succeed in "structuring the possible field of others' actions" (Foucault, 1994, p.237). One of the difficulties encountered by any anthropology of power, is the constant overlapping that occurs between "the art of governing", all the concrete processes that delimit the field of power relations, and the discourse on sovereignty, which claims both to ground the legitimacy of these processes while deploying their signification, even if this means positing a horizon of transcendence, i.e., something beyond power. Likewise, the phenomenon of divine royalty in African societies provides a good example of how power is embedded in a metaphysics of sovereignty.

As far as politics in closed societies is concerned, the imbrication of power and the discourse of sovereignty is so strong that only an effort of defamiliarisation makes it possible to expose the gap between them, as Foucault attempted to do by making history play an active role so we could both examine contemporary power and bring to the fore the realities that constituted it. According to Foucault, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a new mechanics of power was invented, which focused on bodies and no longer on the earth. The classical theory of sovereignty is linked to power that acts upon the earth and its products: "it is a theory that makes it possible to found power around and on the basis of the physical existence of the sovereign, but not on the basis of continuous and permanent systems of surveillance" (Foucault 2001, p.186). However, paradoxically, the principle of sovereignty was to last, at the same time as what Foucault calls "the polymorphous disciplinary mechanism" (Foucault 2001, p.87) was developing. This supposes a legal organisation articulated around the principle of sovereignty, which could co-exist with a disciplinary mechanism.

Foucault never accepted thinking about this disciplinary control in terms of repression or

bans. Criticising Reich and Legendre, he argues that in these works processes of power are reduced to a legal problematic rooted in sovereignty, which implies, among other things, the conception of power as negativity, or as a producer of the forbidden (“power is what says no”) (Foucault 2001, p.423). The shift Foucault implements leads him to redeploy power relations in their plasticity, showing to what extent they are themselves caught up in other types of relations, and are multiform and local, which leads to the notion of micro-powers. From the ethnographic point of view, which attaches importance to local situations and is immersed in daily life, this notion, far from being insignificant, has inspired the research of de Certeau and his team. De Certeau does not hesitate to designate daily activities as tactics. He considers them to be tactics because they cannot be localised in terms of an apparatus from the societal sphere, and they concern no overall project. Indeed, the reality observed by the ethnographer resembles a swarm of relations.

## **Technologies of power and bio-politics**

In his investigation of the technologies of power, Foucault does not simply show how disciplinary techniques centred on individuals and their bodies appear; he also shows how a new technology was implemented at the end of the eighteenth century, which concerns the multiplicity of humans in whole populations. This is what he calls bio-politics, which deals with the population as both a scientific and a political problem. The rise in interest in demography, the development of public hygiene, the establishment of institutions for assistance and insurance, the taking into account of relations between human beings and the environment, sketch out a new configuration in which the disciplinary dimension fades into the background, and is replaced by a project that aims to increase the length of life and regulate biological mechanisms.

With the rise of capitalism, these work-related disciplinary technologies were reinforced by less direct processes, making it possible to have power over humans as groups of living beings. Individuals are no longer only subjected

in their individual singularity, they are also controlled as specimens of a population of living beings: the population as an indivisible entity of living beings is the new subject of bio-political sovereignty.

Whereas the disciplinary techniques focused specifically on human beings conceived in terms of their bodily individuality, man as body, bio-political techniques integrate the multiplicity of human beings as a global mass by focusing on man as a species. Unlike disciplining, which is limited to an anatomopolitics, bio-politics designates the process through which power takes control of the processes affecting life from birth to death (such as illness, old age, handicaps and the influence of the environment) and which, if they are perfectly uncertain at the individual level, as a collective phenomenon have determining economic and political effects. The birth of a science of policing and the premises of public health policies have progressively placed biological or natural life among the state’s technical management preoccupations, calculations, and forecasts. The conformity of lifestyle and the mores of political subjects preoccupy the state much less than their birth and the listing in political records of their biological life in terms of nationality and demography.

At the bio-political level, the individual is no longer targeted, but is considered by the bio-political norm as a specimen of a population whose movements – both internal and external – must be regulated in terms of reduction, growth and migrations. While traditional sovereignty was characterised by its power to make people die and let them live, power henceforth is defined by its capacity to make people live and let them die. Far from contradicting this redefinition of power, which is oriented towards life, state racism and the millions of deaths it produces, it affirms itself as having a stake in this problematic of the “biological strengthening” (Foucault, 1997, p.230) of a population.

## **Anthropology in a transnational world**

It is interesting to note that the problematic of bio-power has directly inspired recent research in anthropology. With respect to globalisation, a great deal of commentary is concerned with the

ever-increasing imbrications of the local and the global. More essential to me seems to be the interrogations of the paradigm of the nation-state, which dominated a twentieth century rocked by the emergence of new modes of infra-national and supranational governmentality. It is the model of territorial sovereignty that is at stake here, and my findings converge with Foucault's analyses, which note that power no longer has any particular affinity with the territory, but is exerted above all on multiplicities. However, in the transnational space delineated by globalisation, mobility and migration, or what Appadurai (1996) designates as flows, play an essential role. This explains why recent politics focus on questions of immigration, humanitarian catastrophes and the problem of refugees.

Anthropologists invoke Foucauldian concepts to think of the world as deterritorialised, because they provide a new perspective on complex situations. The works on diasporas bear witness to this. One example is the case of the Chinese from Hong Kong, as analysed by Ong (1999). At the time of British domination they were considered to be British dependent territory citizens and had the right to travel to the UK but not to reside there. Since the retrocession of Hong Kong to China, they have British national overseas status, and benefit from what Ong calls "partial citizenship". They have always been considered to be coloured people, in the same way as people from the Caribbean, but they are treated particularly well because they contribute to economic dynamism.

In 1990 the British government modified its immigration policy in order to confer citizenship upon certain Chinese residents from Hong Kong. This action was a way of avoiding a movement of panic linked to the retrocession to China, which could have brought about a long-term destabilisation of the market. It was in this way that 50,000 Chinese nationals and their families, belonging to the social elite in Hong Kong, obtained British nationality. Those who were selected were still young, between the ages of 30 and 40, had a high level of education, and through their activities and networks participated in the economic activities of the transnational capital. For Ong (1999) the successive flip-flopping of the British authorities with regard to their citizenship reflects the implementation of a bio-politics that treats the various population

groups differently according to their place in the economic system.

Another line of research opened up by reflections on bio-politics concerns the condition of populations deprived of any territorial recognition or institutional status, those who are reduced to a condition of "bare life", according to Agamben, who claims to continue Foucault's reflections on the matter. It is this bare life, disconnected from the civic context, which constitutes the matter of the masses of refugees who are non-citizen residents established either permanently or temporarily in the territories of industrialised states, in the ghettos of the cities or in refugee camps. According to Agamben, this condition prefigures a form of community with no territory and no borders, in which the residents' current refugee status prefigures their future organisation. Legally vague, as far as identity and citizenship are concerned, the status of refugee, which is being applied to growing masses of populations, dismantles the state–nation–territory triad inherited from the classical age, and puts into play another definition of the subject/sovereignty relationship: "the space of bare life, originally located in the margins of the political organisation, ends up progressively coinciding with the political space" (Agamben 1997, p.17).

This bare life theme has been fairly popular in anthropology recently. This interest is due to the fact that from Kosovo to Rwanda researchers have created an ethnography of conflicts and violence, and their effects. The refugees' experience of suffering and destitution, and the denial of their humanity (Agier 2002; Kleinman *et al.* 1997), but also the process of marginalisation that victimises those who are abandoned and on the margins of society (like illegal immigrants and excluded people), have led to analyses of discourse and the practices through which contemporary governmentality deals with life (Fassin and Memmi 2004).

Other research focuses on the modes in which the international community intervenes in the humanitarian domain. Here the idea is to reflect on the emergence of relatively autonomous powers which the results in new tensions, because their initiatives tend to continuously destabilise existing sovereignties. In the field, on the sidelines of conflicts, non-governmental organisations, which insist that they are rooted in civil society, render the situation more complex in their own



ways (Abélès 2006). It is easy to see that the opposition between politics and civil society is not very useful, because the non-governmental organisations that find themselves representing their constituents are directly involved in a power relation and attempt to exert this power. What interests me is how contestation and the different forms of resistance are expressed in this highly complex and diffuse web of organisations.

The research carried out by anthropologists on armed conflicts and humanitarian interventions helps us to better understand this dimension of politics. Concerning Kosovo, Pandolfi (2002) shows that humanitarian interventions result in real investments by transnational organisations, which develop specific strategies and attempt to extend their control over local institutions. While in theory they are considered to be apolitical, their action falls within the scope of a power relation which they shape, with the more or less self-interested help of other groups, which claim to be their legitimate contacts at the local level. We see a configuration of powers coming into existence that are more and more deterritorialised, leading the anthropologist to qualify them as migrant sovereignty, in so far as the traditional nation-state apparatus no longer has a direct hold on the real elements that are profoundly modified by the conflict.

From a more global point of view, what is at stake today is a group of processes that force us to make profound modifications to a fixed conception of politics articulated around the concept of sovereignty. By proposing an approach that could be designated as a pragmatics of governmentality, defined as a “group of actions on possible actions” (1984, p.316) Foucault opened up a fruitful path of enquiry. Those who try to extend political anthropology into the field of emerging forms, as I did with

respect to the construction of Europe, find themselves facing the following dilemma: either they are won over by the dominant institutionalism and resolve to ignore all the problems raised by the theoretical construction of their object, burying it under concepts that end up distorting it; or they have to accept being confronted by “unidentified political objects”, according to Jacques Delors’ expression. This posture, which seems to be the only one that is tenable in the long run, is the one recommended by Foucault, that of the “blind empiricist”, the researcher who proceeds by trial and error and tries to make their own tools without paying too much attention to conforming to their discipline.

While it is not a good idea to work too fast, as we have sometimes tended to do when transposing his analyses of bio-politics to every domain with no precaution, we should remember the philosopher’s most precious legacy, when he incites us to continuously return to the question of power and to elucidate its most obscure mysteries. Beyond the debate on the ability of the category of bio-power to account for our contemporary situation; a debate that is today far from closed, one must underline the consistent epistemological perspective of thinking of political anthropology as a pragmatics of governmentality, which was opened up thanks to Foucault. To adopt this approach implies that we continue to forge new tools for a better apprehension of the movements that affect politics, and which are demonstrated in the reconfiguration of power relations. To conclude, let us remember that when we are faced with the complexity of political processes, we must be both audacious and imaginative in our trial and error research.

*Translated from French*

---

## References

- |  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| ABÈLES, M. 2005. <i>Anthropologie de l'Etat</i> , 2nd edn. Paris: Petite Bibliothèque Payot. | AGAMBEN, G. 1995. <i>Moyens sans fins. Notes sur la politique</i> . Paris: Rivages.   | <i>sovereign power and bare life</i> . Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press]. |
| ABÈLES, M. 2006. <i>Politique de la survie</i> . Paris: Flammarion.                          | AGAMBEN, G. 1997. <i>Homo Sacer. Le pouvoir souverain et la vie nue</i> . Paris: Seuil. [Trans. 1998 as <i>Homo sacer</i> : | AGAMBEN, G. 1999. <i>Ce qui reste d'Auschwitz</i> . Paris: Rivages.              |

- AGIER, M. 2002. *Aux bords du monde, les réfugiés*. Paris: Flammarion. [Trans. 2008 as *On the margins of the world: the refugee experience today*. Cambridge: Polity Press].
- APPADURAI, A. 1996. *Modernity at large*. Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press.
- CLIFFORD, J. AND MARCUS, G., eds 1986. *Writing cultures*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- COPANS, J., ed. 1975. *Anthropologie et impérialisme*. Paris: Maspéro.
- DELEUZE, G. 1986. *Michel Foucault*. Paris: Editions de Minuit. [Trans. 1988 as *Michel Foucault*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press].
- DERRIDA, J. 1967. *De la grammatologie*. Paris: Editions de Minuit. [Trans. 1998 as *Of grammatology*. Corrected edition. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press].
- DREYFUS, H. AND RABINOW, P. 1982. *Michel Foucault*. London: Harvester.
- DREYFUS, H. L. AND RABINOW, P. *Michel Foucault. Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- EVANS-PRITCHARD, E. E. AND FORTES, M., eds 1940. *African political systems*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- FASSIN, D. AND MEMMI, D. 2004. *Le gouvernement des corps*. Paris: EHESS Editions.
- FOUCAULT, M. 1969. *L'archéologie du savoir*. Paris: Gallimard. [Trans. 1982 as *The archeology of knowledge*. New York: Pantheon].
- FOUCAULT, M. 1975. *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*. Paris: Gallimard. [Trans. 1977 as *Discipline and punish: the birth of a prison*. New York: Random House].
- FOUCAULT, M. 1980. *Power/knowledge: selected interviews and writings, 1972–1977*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- FOUCAULT, M. 1997. *Il faut défendre la société. Cours au Collège de France, 1976*. Paris: Gallimard-Seuil. [Trans. 2003 as *Society must be defended: lectures at the College de France, 1975–1976*. Picador].
- FOUCAULT, M. 2000. “The subject and power”, In: Faubion, J., ed. *Power: essential works of Foucault, 1954–1984*. Vol. 3, New York: New Press.
- FOUCAULT, M. 2001. *Dits et écrits, II, 1976–1988*. 1st edn. publ. in 1994. Paris: Gallimard.
- GEERTZ, C. 1973. *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Book.
- GEERTZ, C. 1988. *Works and lives: the anthropologist as author*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- HARVEY, D. 1990. *The condition of postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- JAMESON, F. 1984. “Postmodernism or the cultural logic of capitalism”, *New Left Review*, 146, 53–92.
- KLEINMAN, A., DAS, V. AND LOCK, M. 1997. *Social suffering*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- MARCUS, G., ed. 1999. *Critical anthropology now*. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.
- MARCUS, G. AND FISCHER, M. 1986. *Anthropology as cultural critique*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- ONG, A. 1999. *Flexible citizenship: the cultural logics of transnationality*. Duke, NC: Duke University Press.
- PANDOLFI, M. 2002. “‘Moral entrepreneurs’, souverainetés mouvantes et barbelés. Le biopolitique dans les Balkans post-communistes”, *Anthropologie et sociétés*, 26 (1), 29–51.
- RABINOW, P. 1977. *Reflections on fieldwork in Morocco*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- RABINOW, P. 1984. *The Foucault reader*. New York: Parthenon Books.
- RABINOW, P. 1999. “American moderns”, In: Marcus, G., ed. *Critical anthropology now*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 305–333.
- SAID, E. 1979. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House.