

THE ACCIDENT

“Philosophical reflection has no other object than to get rid of what is accidental.” (G.W.F. Hegel, *Die Vernunft in der Geschichte*, p. 29)

“It was no longer a question of leading people to their salvation in the next world, but rather ensuring it in this world. And in this context, the word salvation takes on different meanings: health, well being (that is, sufficient wealth, standard of living), security, protection against accidents.” (Michel Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power’, in Rabinow, et al., *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, p. 215)

“ .. collisions are transformative. A relationship can occasionally fulfill a person, but only a collision can transform them. Its the same for cultures as it is for individuals.” (Tom Robbins, *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas*, p. 277-8)

“Would you complain because a beautiful sunset doesn’t have a future or a shooting star a payoff? And why should romance ‘lead anywhere?’ Passion isn’t a path through the woods. Passion is the woods. It’s the deepest, wildest part of the forest; the grove where the fairies still dance and obscene old vipers snooze in the booze. Everybody but the most dried up and dysfunctional is drawn to the grove and enchanted by its mysteries, but then they just can’t wait to call in the chain saws and bulldozers and replace it with a family-style restaurant or a new S & L. That’s the payoff, I guess. Safety. Security. Certainty. Yes, indeed. Well, remember this, pussy latte: we’re not involved in a ‘relationship’, you and I, we’re involved in a collision. Collisions don’t much lend themselves to secure futures, but the act of colliding is hard to beat for interest. Correct me if I’m wrong.” (Tom Robbins, *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas*, p. 276)

“ .. an accident, insignificant in appearance, never leads to important results without a pre-existing cause.” (Francoise Armengaud, quoted in Napoleon III, *History of Julius Caesar*, Vol 1, p. x)

“Everyone has an inner landscape.” (Paul Virilio, *Politics of the Very Worst*, p. 111)

Introduction/statement of problem

- *What is critique?*
- *For a critique of the political economy of security; the accident*

What we have tried to outline in this brief seminar series might be summarized as follows:

We have been interested in the formation and functioning of normalizing society, or perhaps more precisely still, a “safe” space for living. The techniques for inventing and sustaining such a space - the specific practices out of which it was born, recognised and continually refined and reproduced - make up, for us, something of an alternative *genealogy* of the Western world’s fascination with **security**. For us, security is to be read not so much in the grand domain of diplomacy and politics among nations, as in the everyday and mundane regularities of social life: the dull spaces, somewhat behind one’s head. That mass of words, inscription, thought, that makes social life conceivable at all: the minor details building up to the indivisible whole, within which man will find a place and a home, and an order of relations within which to exist, and move forward. The concern for the mundane has for us been the location of a very different “technology” of security from that usually associated with state-to-state bargaining, multilateral agreements, strategic alliances, weaponry and armaments. Though our concern has also been with “forces”, we have mapped this very differently. Our *political* technology of security, we have seen, is as equally, if not more important than the global structures of liberal peace so often take to be the positive endpoint of this frightful **state of security** so frequently longed for. The birth of the prison, the emergence of the clinic, the constitution of reason, the birth of economy, the training of bodies, the regularization of spaces, the kicking-into-motion of whole populations, the coming confinement of informatization: our concern has been with the *interior*; the constitution of a *positive space*, within which power would operate and life would be modified.

Our guiding hypothesis is a broad one: that this alternative genealogy of security is essential to an understanding of contemporary political life, and the history and trajectory of Western modernity in general. Our very lives, in all their detail and specificity, are locations for a *politics of security* we’d do well to better consider.

So, to remind ourselves: we began with the move from the traditional values of virtue and prudence exemplified in Machiavelli’s *Prince* to the new matrix within which the question of government - newly emerging - would be rationalized. This new matrix - initially “reason of state”, and later “biopolitics” - marks the beginning of an era from which would emerge a form of political knowledge placing the population and the mechanisms to ensure its regulation at the centre of its concern. The development of the “forces of the State” becomes the *modus operandi* of modern government. As the modern world takes-off, and the war-model of the interaction of states becomes further embedded, the question becomes one of organizing and “liberating” the populace within the parameters of good government and general State safety and profitability. Put another way, the question of security becomes: ‘How to multiply and increase the productive forces of the population without at the same time making that population more difficult to govern.’? The question of “techniques of governing” becomes more and more important, and the general question of security is radically rethought along the lines of a developmental model *internally*, and an historical (quasi evolutionary) model externally.¹

Security is no longer something to be achieved, so much as it is a balance between forces to

¹ national sentiment, the volk, the ‘conquest of the historical world’, in Cassirer’s terms.

be constantly policed.²

This takes us to the threshold of modernity, where both the population becomes a domain of modification and where also it becomes the bulwark protecting the homology and integrity of the State itself (conceived now as the nation, society discovered, etc.) The question of government is effectively and steadily effaced in the context of the revolutionary movements of the new republics, and in any case history is beginning to be effaced by the technical and temporal take-off of the nineteenth century. Remember at this point that beyond simply a description of an alternative domain of security we have also been guided in our analysis by a central underpinning hypothesis: that over the period of the modern world as a whole we witness a very profound transformation in the technicalities of the “power to govern”. We are referring here to the shift in accent from the question of governing and constituting spaces for existence, to regularising the everyday mundane of social life within these newly cleansed spaces. This - above all - has not been forced through by the police (though they had their part to play), but rather by the anonymous technology of the clock, the timetable, the industrial and military rhythm. A new form of technology emerges appropriate to mass society: that of the *universal dromos*, in the words of Paul Virilio.

There are of course many things we’ve left unsaid in this rapid genealogy; but it is the *tendency* that I’ve wanted to emphasise. The detail is open to further investigation.

And to have a sense where we might - in better circumstances - return, or indeed begin, we’ve attempted to locate a series of domains, somewhat more basic to social life than usually allowed, wherein these twin technologies of governmentality (technologies of *space* and *time*) have effected their revolutions: the asylum, the clinic, the workhouse, the factory, the prison, the barracks, the map-makers table, the smart office, the wired home ..

But enough of all that: for a more urgent question now faces us. Can we conceive of a space of freedom within the genealogy of regular power this far outlined?

Let’s turn to this question now.

The accident

We know broadly the consequences that follow this development of a certain *political technology of security* (we’ve touched upon a series of domains, and emphasised the point in a series of overlapping ways): the emergence of a new modality of power (bio-power), and type of politics (bio-politics). Whether it’s the new exclusion of madness, the modification of delinquency, the eradication of vagrancy and vagabondage, the taming of libertinage and onanism, the multiplication of bodies and machines, the reconstitution of urban and rural spaces, the surveillance of the populace *en masse*, the provision of welfare, leisure, consumption, the aesthetic constitution of a domain of existence; the pivotal relationship of practices of power and knowledge has been our familiar territory.

The central thesis restated has been this: that beginning in the 16thC and passing through the 17th and 18th centuries, one sees the beginning of a universal project of state formation and population control. Though the detail of such a project is important, and its accidental, at times haphazard character should not be understated, we cannot understand the nature of the take-off of the West, and the birth of our world more generally, unless we step back; to view the broader tendency. This broader tendency - I would suggest - is the birth and development of something akin to a universal model of human development: a complex collision of forces

² be reminded of the lasting importance of Foucault’s own summary of his 1978 course at the Collège de France, ‘Security, Territory and Population’, translated in Michel Foucault (1997), *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume I* (NY: The New Press).

and dull words, setting the parameters of what it might or might not be possible to think henceforth.

The question becomes urgent: what is it to resist? What is it to revolt? What is it to think? What characterises critique? What is it to live?³

Might we find an answer to this question in returning to the fundamental nature of security--delineating its structure, the relations of truth it defends and organizes under it--and posing against power a kind of counter-nature of philosophical thought; perhaps **the accidental**?

If indeed the modern world has been fascinated by *substance*, might we not bring back into play its opposite; the *accident*? Is there a trap here in returning to a dialectical thinking, or can the dialectical be delinked from modern systems of thought (liberalism, marxism, etc.) and redeployed in a new way? Let us think about this question first, before moving to consider the accident; for if there is a space already open waiting for us (critique)--in other words, if resistance is presupposed by power (as Foucault argued), doesn't this invalidate any effort to "think otherwise"? We have to deal with this question of critique first. Through it, and by way of it, we might be able to unravel some of the possible constraining forces that would play upon our reimagining the *accident* as the antidote to the Western world's fascination with *substance*, with **security**.

Toward a politics of renewal

".. the next move is ours .. Each one of us, as long as life stirs in him, may play a part in extricating himself from the power system by asserting his primacy as a person in quiet acts of mental or physical withdrawal- in gestures of non-conformity, in abstentions, restrictions, inhibitions, which will liberate him from the domination of the pentagon of power." (Lewis Mumford, *The Pentagon of Power*, p. 435, p. 433)

Is Foucault, in the end - in the last analysis - simply a liberal thinker, of one kind or another?

"Though no immediate and complete escape from the ongoing power system is possible, least of all through mass violence, the changes that will restore autonomy and initiative to the human person all lie within the province of each individual soul, one it is roused. Nothing could be more damaging to the myth of the machine, and to the dehumanised social order it has brought into existence, than a steady withdrawal of interest, a slowing down of tempo, a stoppage of senseless routines and mindless acts." (Lewis Mumford, *The Pentagon of Power*, p. 433)

How is it that such things can be commonly said at such a point in world history (AD 1970s).

³ of course Foucault very much attempted to move away from existential argumentation, and root his investigations in the practical effects of power and knowledge. This was a strategic choice, but one also informed by his immediate political/intellectual situation. That said, he's not in contest, fundamentally at least, with a type of thinking that would (taking Heidegger, of course, as its basis) begin with these questions and work the other way round.

What does the popularization of this type of critique tell us about the homology of the State-power complex? Should we take Baudrillard's statement, that Foucault is the "last dinosaur of the Classical age", seriously?

"On the terms imposed by technocratic society, there is no hope or mankind except by 'going with' its plans for accelerated technological progress, even though man's vital organs will all be cannibalised in order to prolong the megamachine's meaningless existence. But for those of us who have thrown off the myth of the machine, the next move is ours: for the gates of the technocratic prison will open automatically, despite their rusty ancient hinges, as soon as we choose to walk out." (Lewis Mumford, *The Pentagon of Power*, p. 435)

Is renewal as simple as Mumford suggests? Foucault would always say with a smile: "don't ask me what to do: there a thousand new directions to invent". Is this enough? Michel Foucault, J'accuse!

"There is no right to say: 'Revolt for me, there is a final liberation coming for every man.' But I am not in agreement with someone who would say: 'It is useless to revolt; it will always be the same thing.' One does not make the law for the person who risks his life before power. Is there or is there not a reason to revolt? Let's leave the question open." (Michel Foucault, 'On Revolution', p. 8)

What is critique?

And what about critique? If the aim has been to move away from the totalising intellectual, and toward the specific one (engaged, inscribed, subjective), what downsides have come along with the benefits? Did Foucault's critique of the intellectual merely play into the hands of the trajectory of advanced liberalism (individualization, fragmentation, differentiation, the suicide of the left)?

"The role of an intellectual is not to tell others what they must do. By what right would he do so? And remember all the prophecies, promises, injunctions and plans intellectuals have been able to formulate in the course of the last two centuries and of which we have seen the effects. The work of an intellectual is not to mold the political will of others; it is, through the analyses that he does in his own field, to re-examine evidence and assumptions, to shake up habitual ways of working and thinking, to dissipate conventional familiarities, to re-evaluate rules and institutions and starting from this re-problematization (where he occupies his specific profession as an intellectual) to participate in the formation of a political will (where he has his role as a citizen to play)." (Michel Foucault, 'The Concern for Truth', in: *Foucault Live*, pp. 462-3)

Toward an ethics of thought?

That might also be an ethics of truth, an ethic toward the other: an ethic/aesthetic of life. Consider for a moment the following breathtaking passage from Foucault:

“It is through revolts that subjectivity (not that of great men but that of whomever) introduces itself into history and gives it the breath of life. A delinquent puts his life into the balance against absurd punishments; a madman can no longer accept confinement and the forfeiture of his rights; a people refuses the regime which oppresses it. This does not make the rebel in the first case innocent, nor does it cure in the second, and it does not assure the third rebel of the promised tomorrow. One does not have to be solidarity with them. One does not have to maintain that these confused voices sound better than the others and express the ultimate truth. For there to be a sense in listening to them and in searching for what they want to say, it is sufficient that they exist and that they have against them so much which is set up to silence them. A question of morality? Perhaps. A question of reality? Certainly. All the disenchantments of history amount to nothing; it is due to such voices that the time of men does not have the form of an evolution, but precisely that of a history.” (Michel Foucault, ‘On Revolution’, p. 8)

Toward an ethic of living?

This is surely the question of the late 1980’s and early 1990’s: ‘what happened to ethics’? Is there any such thing as “positive” resistance?

“If there’s a salvation, then it lies in the humility of philosophical, scientific and political thinking. Today we need a practical humility, not the harmless and God-pleasing humility of the saints, but a radical scientific and philosophical humility. We are nothing. Totality will always remain inaccessible to us. A scientist, a philosopher, who confesses this humility, contributes to the salvation of humanity.” (Paul Virilio, *Conversations with French Philosophers*, p. 104)

Is there still the possibility of collective resistance?

“We must refuse the division of labour that is so often proposed to us between individuals who become indignant and speak out; and governments which reflect and act .. The will of individuals must be joined .. [to challenge] .. every abuse of power, whoever the author, whoever the victims. After all, we are all governed - and, as such, we are in solidarity.” (Michel Foucault, ‘Face aux gouvernements, les droits de l’Homme’, printed in: *Libération*, 30 June- 1 July, 1984)

What is the role of the intellectual in allowing people to recognise solidarity? Does this play into the hands of the State that attempts to mobilize the mass? Does this play into the hands of

the positive function of knowledge following the ‘enlightenment’? Is critique possible following Hegelian dialectics? Is there such a thing as “thought from the outside”?⁴

“Honestly speaking, I ask nothing more, but I should like to know which life is the highest, that of the philosopher, or that of the free man. In case the philosopher is merely a philosopher, completely lost in his profession, without knowing the blessed life of freedom, then he lacks a very important thing, he gains the world and loses himself. This never can happen to a man who lives for freedom, even though he were to lose ever so much.

For freedom, therefore, I am fighting (partly in this letter, partly and principally within myself), I am fighting for the future, for either/or. That is the treasure I desire to bequeath to those whom I love in the world; yea, if my little son were at this instant of an age when he could thoroughly understand me, I would say to him, “I leave to thee no fortune, no title, no dignitaries, but I know where there lies buried a treasure which suffices to make thee richer than the whole world, and this treasure belongs to thee, and thou shalt not even express thanks to me for it lest thou take hurt to thine own soul by owning everything to another. This treasure is deposited in thine own inner self: there is an either/or which makes a man greater than the angels. That which is prominent in my either/or is the ethical. It is therefore not yet a question of the choice of something in particular, it is not a question of the reality of the thing chosen, but of the reality of the act of choice.” (Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, pp. 148-9)

Is this all that revolution and rebellion can guarantee? The choice?

“When I study the mechanisms of power, I try to analyse their specificity .. Rather than indicating the presence of a ‘master’, I worry about comprehending mechanisms of domination; and I do it so that those who are inserted in certain relations of power, who are implicated in them, might escape them through their actions of resistance and rebellion, might transform them in order not to be subjugated any longer. And if I don’t ever say what must be done, it isn’t because I believe there’s nothing to be done; on the contrary, it is because I think that there are a thousand things to do, to invent, to forge, on the part of those who, recognising the relations of power in which they’re implicated, have decided to resist or escape them. From this point of view all of my investigations rest on a postulate of absolute optimism. I do not conduct my analyses in order to say: this is how things are, look how trapped you are. I say certain things only to the extent to which I see them as capable of permitting the transformation of reality.” (Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, pp. 173-4)

⁴ remember, this being the title for Foucault’s famous essay on Maurice Blanchot.

“There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons.” (Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, p. 178)

Virilio contra security, Napoleon contra uncertainty

There is a line from Edward Abbey which always struck me: “There comes a time in the life of us all when we must lay aside our books or put down our tools and leave our place of work and walk forth on the road to meet the enemy face-to-face. Once and for all and at last.” Like Jacob battling the angel; we have to face that which is both within us; our salvation and ultimate threat. Enough of philosophy! Enough of security! Let us be completely unprepared for the immanent appearance of the accident!

- can we live with uncertainty?
- can we counterpose the accident to the State?
- what would it mean to think about death, collectively, individually?
- do you fear death?
- can we live without fear?
- what would it mean to be free of fear?
- what would it mean to embrace the uncertain?
- is the accidental that which threatens us, or which liberates us?
- is it possible to think and live *unstrategically*?
- how can we care for others and not embrace order?
- what happens when people are traumatized by accidents?
- what is disturbing in the accidental?
- what is our essential relation to Being? If that were delinked from mortality would we continue to seek security?
- does the accident have its own negative?
- does the accident escape the gaze?
- is there such a thing as invisible accidents?
- is a coincidence a beautiful accident; or do accidents have to destroy in order to make stronger?
- what is the relationship of truth to the accident?
- what is the relationship of politics to death?
- what is the relationship of politics to truth?
- how is the accident used by the State to ensure a new round of security procedures, a new level of colonization?

‘Work on the accident is critical’, writes Paul Virilio. I’m not sure if sees within the accident a means to escape strategic knowledge (what he calls ‘military intelligence’, and what Deleuze-Guattari call ‘state philosophy’), but it might be useful to think this through. Of course it opens our lives up to questions we don’t normally discuss: for example, our existence; the potential of being alive; what might or might not be done with life, with *a* life, *your* life. We needn’t be conspiratorial; its most probably a confluence of factors that prevent us from real looking into ourselves, looking around at others; thinking in new ways about the world, about our environments, about what we’d like to have present in the spirit of both ourselves and others. One thing that people experience with real accidents is trauma. They experience a kind of “waking up”; a firmly experienced sense of the fragility of things. Would the world be kinder--not in a humanitarian/polizei way, but in a human, perhaps tragic way--if death had a stronger grip, or was more readily recognisable in the discursive economies of the societies in which find ourselves? As you know what we have charted in this course is a form of power which manifests itself in the domain of life, and aims to facilitate and sustain it. Emergency wards, fire brigades, police forces, disaster assistance--how many more countless human activities place survival above **the accident**? What is the relationship of the accident to fate? Is there a correct time of dying?

I have no answers to any of these questions, but think they should be raised as political problems. For as we know, the *systems of preservation and conservation* that have swarmed around the development of biopower as a governmental rationality have real effects on real lives. Whole populations are kept safe and yet everyone is imprisoned: caught up in an economy of power relations whose effects are more profound than most of us can possibly conceive. We accept all of this, because we want to live. We accept **courts** because we want to live. We accept **cops** because we want to live. We accept **hospitals** because we want to live. We accept **asylums** because we want to live. We accept **school** because we want to live. We accept **military service** because we want to live. We accept **the press** because we want to live. We accept **television** because we want to live. We accept **the State** because we want to live.

But maybe there are other ways in which we could exist. Maybe *living* should be transvalued; looked at again. And urgently.

Some time back I proposed to a friend, over a beer, a ‘Political Coalition for the Revival of Death’. What would it mean to live without fear? *Do societies need to be ordered?* There are some immense issues here; both dark ones and hopeful ones. Can we imagine a society of bright eyed beautiful souls? Can we imagine a society of dark eyed animal killers? What would it mean to live with the accident, the *risk*, the *uncertainty*, the *insecurity* of a world without biopower, without the State, without all those complex systems of domination we have invented for ourselves and our fellow women and men? Is this where we’re going anyway?⁵ What violence awaits us in the 21st century?

what is it to live?
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⁵ Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society* (Sage, 1995).