

# NIETZSCHE AND FOUCAULT ON POWER, PHILOSOPHY, AND TRUTH: A CONVERSATION WITH VANESSA LEMM

## *NIETZSCHE Y FOUCAULT SOBRE EL PODER, LA FILOSOFÍA Y LA VERDAD: UNA CONVERSACIÓN CON VANESSA LEMM*

BY PÍA ROMERO\* AND HUGO TAVERA VILLEGAS\*\* INTERVIEW WITH PROFF. VANESSA LEMM

As part of the *dossier* of CONfines' 41<sup>st</sup> number, dedicated to Michel Foucault on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death, we had the opportunity to interview the renowned philosopher and academic Vanessa Lemm.<sup>1</sup> Professor Lemm is Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of Greenwich and editor of the journal *Nietzsche-Studien*. She earned her PhD in philosophy from The New School for Social Research and has held academic positions in the United States, Germany, Chile, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Among her published works are the books *Nietzsche's Animal Philosophy: Culture, Politics, and the Animality of the Human Being* (2009) and *Homo Natura: Nietzsche, Philosophical Anthropology and Biopolitics* (2020), both translated into Spanish. She also edited *Michel Foucault: Neoliberalism and Biopolitics* (2010), and co-edited *The Government of Life: Foucault, Biopolitics and Neoliberalism* (2014) with Miguel Vatter, and more recently *The Viral Politics of Covid-19: Nature, Home and Planetary Health* (2022).

In this conversation, she discusses the continued relevance of Foucault's thought, particularly the importance of his reflections on power for understanding our present, shaped by multiple crises. She also touches on Nietzsche's influence on his work, the usefulness of the biopolitics paradigm to analyze recent phenomena such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and the need to develop alternative ways of thinking about our shared life with other species.

This *dossier*, which includes the interview, stems from a conference organized by members of the School of Social Sciences and Government at Tecnológico de Monterrey. It was part of the international conference "Foucault, 40 Years Later," coordinated by the Complutense University of Madrid. A glance at the number of events held under this banner reveals the enduring interest in the work of the French philosopher. It was within this intellectual framework that this interview took place.

**Pía Romero (PR): A quick glance at the number of events held under the Foucault, 40 Years Later conference reveals the enduring interest in the work of Michel Foucault. To what do you attribute the actuality of his thought? What explains Foucault's relevance today, forty years after his death?**

<sup>1</sup> The interview was conducted via email.

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**Vanessa Lemm (VL):** The actuality of Foucault's thought is related to two main innovations: one, a methodological innovation, meaning, his way of pursuing philosophical enquiries after the death of God or what he also refers to as "archaeology" and "genealogy". The second reason is related to the conceptual apparatus that he has created based on his understanding of power as a relational and open-hierarchical concept. This conceptual apparatus entails, for example, the concepts of disciplinary and sovereign power, biopower and biopolitics, pastoral power and governmentality, etc. Both his methodological approach and his so-called conceptual "toolbox" are the key elements of an incredibly powerful philosophy that is designed to provide what Foucault refers to as an "ontology of existence." For Foucault, ontology is not a return to a metaphysical account of reality; rather, by "ontology of existence" he means a critical and transformative understanding of our present that leads towards the becoming of new, altered and freer forms of individual and collective life.

These innovations, the methodological and the conceptual, are both indebted to Nietzsche's thought. More precisely, Nietzsche's idea of genealogy as a form of critical history that "deconstructs" the "origin" of our values, and his idea of will to power as exemplified by the relationship between slave and master morality, among other.

In Foucault, archaeology reflects a post-metaphysical understanding of philosophical enquiry insofar as it questions our historical past by displacing the human being as a transcendental subject of knowledge. As such, Foucault's archaeological method seeks to uncover the underlying fundamental rules that govern the discourses of a particular time. These rules are not grammatical or logical rules of language, but rather material rules which describe and limit the conditions of possibility of true knowledge within a particular time frame. Thus, archaeology aims to reveal the discontinuities in discourse and the historical breaks in understanding, which show how each era is marked by different "epistemes" or "configurations of knowledge". In the age of the "Anthropocene," understood as an age which questions human exceptionalism, Foucault's archaeology continues to have currency because it offers a non-transcendental, non-linear method that departs from traditional historiography which has the human subject at its centre.

Likewise, genealogy serves as a historical critique of the present that seeks to reveal the origins of norms. Following Nietzsche, Foucault contests notions of history that presuppose an "absolute" origin to the meaning of concepts and values, thus hiding from view the contingent conditions that determine their emergence and evolution. Foucault uses genealogy to examine power and knowledge structures by tracing the subject across different time periods to demonstrate how power produces different kinds of subjectivities specific to regimes of knowledge. Again, Foucault's genealogical approach continues to find huge uptake across human and social sciences and is reinforced by the rise of biotechnology and artificial intelligence which confronts us with new power/knowledge configurations that raise the question of the nature of the human being.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> On the relevance of Foucault's methods and conceptual apparatus for political sociology, see Lemm and Ercole (2023).

**Hugo Tavera (HT): Professor Lemm, in various instances, you have noted that among Foucault's intellectual influences, Nietzsche's name stands out. In which aspects of Foucault's thought is this influence most apparent? In relation to what kinds of problems or forms of analysis can Foucault's work be considered essentially Nietzschean?**

**VL:** There are multiple references to Nietzsche's philosophy throughout Foucault's writings, and it would indeed be very interesting to provide a more systematic account of Nietzsche as an interlocutor of Foucault. However, this is not the space for such an account, so let me highlight a few points. Nietzsche is one of the first philosophers to seriously question the very nature of philosophy, truth and life after the "death of God", meaning the overcoming of philosophy as a dogmatic, metaphysical and totalising account of reality and of what it means to be human in this world. Foucault will follow Nietzsche in this exploratory and experimental philosophical trajectory towards a new understanding of our "human condition," to borrow a term from Arendt.

While there are many differences between the two philosophers in terms of their style and perhaps focus, their practice of philosophy is underpinned by a relational conception of power that breaks with the traditional understanding of power (and also politics) as associated with human or divine will (power) and the political structures or institutions that reflect this will (monarchy, democracy, etc.). Both Nietzsche and Foucault consider power to be "everywhere" and, possibly, to be "everything." On the one hand, this offers a crucial standpoint for the practice of critical theory because it questions the belief that knowledge or justice are somehow immune to power structures. On the other hand, it allows Nietzsche and Foucault to develop "affirmative" and "relational" conceptions of power, helping to distinguish power from force, violence and domination. From this new perspective, philosophy becomes an "untimely consideration" of the present which subjects all univocal, absolute, unified, total, etc. claims to power (whether they are of political, moral, religious, etc. in nature) to a radical critique. As such, Nietzsche's and Foucault's thinking remain inscribed in the Kantian tradition of Enlightenment: they are asking the question "What is Enlightenment?" to undermine and overturn illegitimate forms of domination in view of "greater" freedom and enlightenment.

Finally, Foucault will follow Nietzsche's return to the ancient Greeks when it comes to finding affirmative examples of the practice of philosophy as a way of life. Foucault's lectures in the Collège de France on the "government of self and other" and his notion of "care of self" stand in continuity with Nietzsche's account of self-overcoming and philosophy in the tragic age of the Greeks. In my work, I have argued that Foucault's distinction between Socratic and Cynic care of the self that underpins his analysis of parrhesia in the Ancient Greeks is comparable to Nietzsche's conception of truth as *Redlichkeit* (frank and honest speech) which is inscribed within the Cynic tradition of the philosophical life that Foucault pursues in his lectures on the government of self and other.<sup>3</sup>

**HT: In your work, you highlight the central importance of the animal question in Nietzsche's thought, arguing that the German philosopher views human animality not as something to be transcended or tamed, but as a source of transformative creativity. Yet, despite Nietzsche's clear**

<sup>3</sup> On this, see Lemm (2020 y 2024).

influence on his thought, it has been argued that Foucault paid considerably less attention to this issue. Moreover, despite his critique of humanism and his well-known thesis on the death of Man, Foucault says little, if anything, about our relationships with non-human animals. Do you agree with this critique? Would you say that Foucault was a thinker who largely neglected the “animal question”?

VL: I would like to answer this question in a roundabout way, by focussing on the theoretical underpinnings of what we know as “animal studies” or “critical animal studies”. The first stands in continuity with liberal Anglo-American philosophical tradition and is largely based on the idea that animals are sentient beings like us and should therefore be treated with respect and receive the same legal and moral status as human beings. This approach to animal studies is very different from the approach found in the continental tradition, where the animal stands for an “other” that de-centres our perspective on the world, and sheds lights on the problem of anthropomorphism and the limits of knowledge and rationality.

Critical animal studies “de-constructs” anthropocentrism and reevaluates the claims to exceptionalism inherent to western traditions and ways of understanding the human and its relationship to the world and other forms of life. In this second approach, the “human-animal” relationship is not taken as a given because we are both sentient beings. Rather, animal life will always remain strange and inaccessible to us despite the fact of our radical dependency on this more than human life.

Foucault’s conceptions of disciplinary and sovereign power, as well as his conception of biopolitics in all of its variants, have a lot to contribute to the field of critical animal studies as a field that seeks to understand the various dimension of domination and power over life and the body (animal and other) and what this means for our relationship with ourselves, other living beings, and the environment. In short, whether Foucault pronounced himself on animals or not, he is a crucially important interlocutor when it comes to a critical investigation of the human-animal relationship, and towards a new understanding of the problems associated with the age of the Anthropocene including, as mentioned above, the anthropocentrism that this very concept entails.

**PR: Power is a central theme in Foucault’s thought, permeating nearly every phase of his intellectual career and serving as one of the most extensively discussed aspects of his work among scholars and interpreters. What insights can you share about this dimension of his thought? Additionally, how might these reflections help us understand our turbulent present, characterized by extinctions, forced displacements, ongoing conflicts, and the impact of the climate crisis?**

VL: By displacing the concept of sovereign power and arguing that power is not simply the restriction or the absence of freedom, Foucault challenged the idea that power should be thought of as concentrated in the hands of one individual or one institution that is dominant. His idea that power is capillary, ever present and productive rather than merely repressive, allowed for the discovery of an entirely different world of power relations that permeate all social relations and underlies the workings of the State and of capitalism.

Foucault’s investigations on the different kinds of power in modernity have oriented social critique during the last fifty years. In the 70s and 80s, his notions of discipline and

disciplinary power offered a post-Marxist understanding on how schools, factories, prisons and hospitals within a capitalist society work and what their purpose is. In the 90s and early 2000s we see, on the one hand, a shift towards biopolitics and biopower that coincided with a renewed focus on sexuality and gender and, on the hand, the vulnerability of racialized life and the implementation of states of exception and emergency.

With the rise of neoliberalism and anti-globalisation social movements, there was a growing engagement with Foucault's conception of governmentality and the *dispositifs* of security and securitisation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a renewed interest in Foucault's conception of normalisation and the medicalisation of society. Interestingly, with the current resurgence of right-wing populism and neo-fascism that has brought back fantasies about the "strong and homogenous" State led by the "strong man," many theorists are speaking of a phase of "regression" from liberal democracy, and it is not yet clear whether or what new uses can be given to Foucault's analyses of power.

**HT: In your essay "Ideologies of Contagion and Communities of Life" (2022), you argue that the coronavirus pandemic has contributed to what you describe as a 'resurgence of humanism.' You view this resurgence as problematic, as it marks a return to the modern, rational subject positioned in opposition to nature, which is framed as an enemy from which we must protect ourselves. What alternative visions might be proposed in response to this "virulent" humanism? Are other ways of imagining our shared life possible?**

**VL:** In contemporary thought, we have seen numerous attempts to re-conceptualise (human) life in community with other living and non-living beings that undermine the principles of traditional humanism. These attempts are far reaching from critical animal to critical plant studies, from new materialism to posthumanism, and from geontology to planetary studies. As critical discourses, they share: one, a rejection of anthropomorphism and species hierarchy based on an idea of a continuum between nature and culture; two, a rejection of traditional humanism in favour of a transformative, self-overcoming vision of the human; and, three, a normative intent which seeks to redefine the possibility of an acting subject in contrast to a mere attribute of adaptation to given circumstances, without which these discourses would cease to be a critical discourse.

In *Ideologies of Contagion and Communities of Life*, I pointed towards two examples in the history of western philosophy, namely, Ancient Cynicism and Nietzsche's "homo natura," that reflect early articulations of one through three while offering an answer to the question of how a life in community with other living beings could look like and what its underpinning principles would be. For example, the Cynics invite us to model our ethics on the life of animals and Nietzsche calls for a "retranslation of the human being back into nature" as the key task of his philosophy and that of future generations of philosophers. Today, in the age of environmental crisis, species extinction and climate change, there is an urgent need to acknowledge our dependency on more than human life. Following Esposito, life is always already community, and our task is to protect "communities of life" from hyper-immunitary *dispositifs* that end up destroying it.

**PR: In your most recent book, *Homo natura: Nietzsche, Philosophical Anthropology and Biopolitics*, you offer a reading of Nietzsche's concept of "homo natura" from a biopolitical**

**framework. What are the central aspects of this reading? How do you interpret the term *homo natura* and how is it related to the paradigm of biopolitics?**

VL: My book is, at first, a response to current debates in Nietzsche scholarship on the question of naturalism. This debate is largely focused on readings of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Aphorism 230 which features the curious term *homo natura*. Furthermore, the book argues towards a reading of *homo natura* that aligns with philosophical anthropology. I position Nietzsche as mediator between Kant's anthropology and Foucault's claim of the "end of men." Nietzsche's conception of human nature draws on literary and philosophical traditions, as well as the influential discoveries made by Darwin. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the rise of biology as the new episteme plays an important role in the shift of literary and philosophical anthropology away from purely scientific conceptions of human nature towards an idea of human nature as a "whole" that exceeds the mere functionality of the human body. It reflects a shift from Naturphilosophie to Lebensphilosophie. For example, Ludwig Binswanger's existential psychoanalysis points out that the new interest in human nature is oriented towards an exploration of the "inner history of life" that takes its starting point with an investigation of the human body as one that is traversed by multiple, disparate and inaccessible forces that constitute it. For Binswanger, both Nietzsche and Freud are among the first to pursue this new "science" of the human being. Not surprisingly, Binswanger is also one of the key inspirations of Foucault's thinking about life and existence.

For Nietzsche and Freud, the philosophical and psychoanalytical inquiry into the nature of the human being is inseparable from a study of the processes of culture and civilisation. Again, not surprisingly, for Nietzsche and Freud these cultural and civilizational processes are inseparable from forms of power over and of life which is where Foucault's conception of biopolitics comes in.

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