

Letter to The Times Literary Supplement (unpublished)

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I would just like to add my own two cents worth to the controversy in recent issues of *The Times Literary Supplement* over the circumstances surrounding Foucault's death from AIDS and also over the contention that Foucault did not believe in 'objective' truth. (See Raymond Tallis, Review article Dec 21, Richard Sennett, letters, Dec 28 2001, John Hargreaves, letters, Jan 11 2002).

The context and details of Foucault's death from AIDS as the recent discussion indicates remain extremely controversial and have been the subject of widespread discussion in several languages since his death in 1984. The accusation that Foucault deliberately infected his partners with AIDS is certainly nothing new. Most famously, James Miller, publicly airs the rumour in his 1993 biography. The sensationalist aspects of this book have been widely criticised by experts on Foucault's work as well as by those who knew him personally. In particular, Didier Eribon, takes strong exception to Miller's approach in a sequel to his own 1991 biography in French, making the pertinent observation that the debates around Foucault's biography all seem to boil down to one issue: how to write a biography of a philosopher who was also a homosexual.

Even Miller has to admit that he believes the rumours about Foucault's alleged behaviour to be 'essentially false'. An additional problem with Miller's interpretation and those like it is that it provides a somewhat anachronistic reading of events. One might draw attention, for instance, to the fact that a reliable test for AIDS was not available in France until the Spring of 1984 and if Foucault may have indeed suspected that he had the disease, no positive diagnosis of his condition was ever made by doctors. As David Macey, another biographer of Foucault remarks: 'Days before his death, his doctors were still saying: "If it's AIDS"'.

Neither were doctors in a position in the early 1980s to offer much useful advice on the subject of HIV/AIDS or on safe sex. It is certainly true that many gay men, including Foucault, expressed initial disbelief in the existence of a disease that specifically targeted gay men, seeing this as yet another ploy by the medical establishment to exercise social control. But as Michael Bartos a researcher and activist in the area of AIDS and public health policy points out, this attitude changed as firmer medical evidence came to

the fore. And as Bartos further notes these kind of controversies fall into well worn patterns: 'the accusation that an HIV infected person deliberately sought to infect others through anonymous sex is one of the most common tropes of the epidemic. The rumour that Foucault had gone to American bathhouses to deliberately spread HIV should be seen for what it is: a commonplace of the demonisation of people with HIV and an iteration of the standard myths of the malevolent importation of HIV/AIDS.'

Those who knew Foucault (Richard Sennett amongst them) also argue that his rumoured behaviour is simply not consistent with his other behaviour and views on social and political responsibility. Far from limiting himself to writing, he worked hard at the most practical organisational level on committees advocating the rights of prisoners, immigrants, inmates of health institutions and the politically oppressed in countries such as Tunisia, Spain and Poland, and on occasions put himself at some physical risk in doing so.

Leaving the circumstances of Foucault's death aside, I would now like to turn my attention to Raymond Tallis' contention that 'Foucault, as every schoolchild knows, denied that there were such things as objective truths'. John Hargreaves adds to this saying that in Foucault's view 'truth is always an instrument of power'. As Foucault insisted on numerous occasions, he was not trying to claim that truth and power were the same thing. Instead, he was interested in the complex relation between the two. Arguing that one term is not mutually exclusive of the other is not to reduce them to the same thing. However, there is nothing better than the horse's mouth to refute the ongoing and widespread perception of Foucault as a historical idealist and postmodern relativist of the most extreme kind. The first passage I can offer in evidence comes from his 1969 work *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (p.186): 'Ideology is not exclusive of scientificity. Few discourses have given so much place to ideology as clinical discourse or that of political economy: this is not a sufficiently good reason to treat the totality of their statements as being undermined by error, contradiction, and a lack of objectivity.'

The second passage is from a book of lectures published last year under the title *Fearless Speech* (pp.171-3). These lectures were given by Foucault in 1983 in English (lest there be any quibbles about the accuracy of translation here!). He says: 'some people have interpreted [my] analysis as a form of 'historical idealism', but I think such an analysis is completely different. For when I say that I am studying the 'problematization' of madness, crime or sexuality, it is not a way of denying the reality of such phenomena. On the contrary, I have tried to show that it was precisely some real[ity] existent in the world which was the target of social regulation at a given moment ... A given problematization is not an effect or consequence of a historical context or situation, but is an answer given by definite individuals

... You can only understand why this kind of answer appears as a reply to some concrete and specific aspect of the world.'

If nothing else, the recent controversy sparked by Raymond Tallis' remarks would seem to indicate that Foucault's own answers to particular concrete situations continue to impact rather forcefully on the answers and practices of others engaged in dealing with 'real things in the world'.