

The Order of Things : An Archaeology of
the Human Sciences / Michel Foucault,
New York: Vintage Books, 1970. (221 -
226 p)

This event, probably because we are still caught inside it, is largely beyond our comprehension. Its scope, the depth of the strata it has affected, all the positivities it has succeeded in disintegrating and recomposing, the sovereign power that has enabled it, in only a few years, to traverse the entire space of our culture, all this could be appraised and measured only after a quasi-infinite investigation concerned with nothing more nor less than the very being of our modernity. The constitution of so many positive sciences, the appearance of literature, the folding back of philosophy upon its own development, the emergence of history as both knowledge and the mode of being of empiricity, are only so many signs of a deeper rupture. Signs scattered through the space of knowledge, since they allow themselves to be perceived in the formation, here of philology, there of economics, there again of biology. They are chronologically scattered too: true, the phenomenon as a whole can be situated between easily assignable dates (the outer limits are the years 1775 and 1825); but in each of the domains studied we can perceive two successive phases, which are articulated one upon the other more or less around the years 1795-1800. In the first of these phases, the fundamental mode of being of the positivities does not change; men's riches, the species of nature, and the words with which languages are peopled, still remain what they were in the Classical age: double representations - representations whose role is to designate representations, to analyse them, to compose and decompose them in order to bring into being within them, together with the system of their identities and differences, the general principle of an order. It is only in the second phase that words, classes, and wealth will acquire a mode of being no longer compatible with that of representation. On the other hand, what is modified very early on, beginning with the analyses of Adam Smith, A-L. de Jussieu, or Vicq d'Azyr, at the time of Jones or Anquetil-Duperron, is the configuration of positivities: the way in which, within each one, the representative elements function in relation to one another, in which they perform their double role as designation and articulation, in which they succeed, by means of the interplay of comparisons, in establishing an order. It is this first phase that will be investigated in the present chapter.

II THE MEASURE OF LABOUR

It is often asserted that Adam Smith founded modern political economy - one might say economics *tout court* - by introducing the concept of labour

into a domain of reflection not previously aware of it: all the old analyses of money, trade, and exchange were relegated at a single blow to a prehistoric age of knowledge – with the one possible exception of the Physiocratic doctrine, which is accorded the merit of having at least attempted the analysis of agricultural production. It is true that from the very outset Adam Smith relates the notion of wealth to that of labour:

The annual labour of every nation is the fund which originally supplies it with all the necessaries and conveniences of life which it annually consumes, and which consist always either in the immediate produce of that labour, or in what is purchased with that produce from other nations[1];

it is also true that Smith relates the 'value in use' of things to men's needs, and their 'value in exchange' to the quantity of labour applied to its production:

The value of any commodity, therefore, to the person who possesses it, and who means not to use or consume it himself, but to exchange it for other commodities, is equal to the quantity of labour which it enables him to purchase or command[2].

In fact, the difference between Smith's analyses and those of Turgot or Cantillon is less than is supposed; or, rather, it does not lie where it is generally believed to lie. From the time of Cantillon, and even before him, the distinction between value in use and value in exchange was being clearly made; and again, from Cantillon, quantity of labour was being used as a measurement of the latter. But the quantity of labour inscribed in the price of things was no more than a relative and reducible tool of measurement. A man's labour was in fact equal to the value of the quantity of nourishment necessary to maintain him and his family for as long as a given task lasted[3]. So that in the last resort, need – for food, clothing, housing – defined the absolute measure of market price. All through the Classical age, it was necessity that was the measure of equivalences, and value in use that served as absolute reference for exchange values; the gauge of prices was food, which resulted in the generally recognized privilege accorded in this respect to agricultural production, wheat and land.

Adam Smith did not, therefore, invent labour as an economic concept, since it can be found in Cantillon, Quesnay, and Condillac; he does not even give it a new role to play, since he too uses it as a measure of exchange value: 'Labour, therefore, is the real measure of the exchangeable

value of all commodities'[4]. But he does displace it: he maintains its function as a means of analysing exchangeable wealth; but that analysis is no longer simply a way of expressing exchange in terms of need (and trade in terms of primitive barter); it reveals an irreducible, absolute unit of measurement. At the same time, wealth no longer establishes the internal order of its equivalence by a comparison of the objects to be exchanged, or by an appraisal of the power peculiar to each represent an object of need (and, in the last resort, the most fundamental of all, food); it is broken down according to the units of labour that have in reality produced it. Wealth is always a functioning representative element: but, in the end, what it represents is no longer the object of desire; it is labour.

But two objections immediately present themselves: how can labour be a fixed measure of the natural price of things when it has itself a price – and a variable price? How can labour be an absolute unit when it changes its form, and when industrial progress is constantly making it more productive by introducing more and more divisions into it? Now, it is precisely through these objections, and through their spokesman, as it were, that it is possible to reveal the irreducibility of labour and its primary character. There are, in fact, countries in the world, and, in a particular country, times, in which labour is dear: workers are few, wages are high; elsewhere, or at other times, manpower is plentiful, it is badly remunerated, and labour is cheap. But what is modified in these alternating states is the quantity of food that can be procured with a day's work; if commodities are in short supply and there are many consumers, each unit of labour will be remunerated with only a small quantity of subsistence; but if, on the other hand, commodities are in good supply, it will be well paid. These are merely the consequences of a market situation; the labour itself, the hours spent at it, the toil and trouble, are in every case the same; and the greater the number of units required, the more costly the products will be. 'Equal quantities of labour, at all times and places, may be said to be of equal value to the labourer'[5].

And yet one could say that this unit is not a fixed one, since to produce the self-same object will require more or less labour according to the perfection of the manufacturing process (that is, according to the degree of the division of labour). But it is not really the labour itself that has changed; it is the relation of the labour to the production of which it is capable. Labour, in the sense of a day's work, toil and trouble, is a fixed numerator: only the denominator (the number of objects produced) is

capable of variations. A single worker who had to perform on his own the eighteen distinct operations required in the manufacture of a pin would certainly not produce more than twenty pins in the course of a whole day. But ten workers who each had to perform only one or two of those operations could produce between them more than forty-eight thousand pins in a day; thus each of those workers, producing a tenth part of the total product, can be considered as making four thousand eight hundred pins during his working day[6]. The productive power of labour has been multiplied; within a single unit (a wage-earner's day), the objects manufactured have been increased in number; their exchange value will therefore fall, that is, each of those objects will be able to buy only a proportionately smaller amount of work in turn. Labour has not diminished in relation to the things; it is the things that have, as it were, shrunk in relation to the unit of labour.

It is true that we exchange because we have needs; without them, trade would not exist, nor labour either, nor, above all, the division that renders it more productive. Inversely, it is needs, when they are satisfied, that limit labour and its improvement: 'As it is the power of exchange that gives occasion to the division of labour, so the extent of this division must always be limited to the extent of that power, or in other words, by the extent of the market'[7]. Needs, and the exchange of products that can answer to them, are still the principle of the economy: they are its prime motive and circumscribe it; labour and the division that organizes it are merely its effects. But within exchange, in the order of equivalences, the measure that establishes equalities and differences is of a different nature from need. It is not linked solely to individual desires, modified by them, or variable like them. It is an absolute measure, if one takes that to mean that it is not dependent upon men's hearts, or upon their appetites; it is imposed upon them from outside: it is their time and their toil. In relation to that of his predecessors, Adam Smith's analysis represents an essential hiatus: it distinguishes between the reason for exchange and the measurement of that which is exchangeable, between the nature of what is exchanged and the units that enable it to be broken down. People exchange because they have needs, and they exchange precisely the objects that they need; but the order of exchanges, their hierarchy and the differences expressed in that hierarchy, are established by the units of labour that have been invested in the objects in question. As men experience things – at the level of what will soon be called psychology – what they are exchanging is what is 'indispensable, commodious or

pleasurable' to them, but for the economist, what is actually circulating in the form of things is labour – not objects of need representing one another, but time and toil, transformed, concealed, forgotten.

This hiatus is of great importance. It is true that Adam Smith is still, like his predecessors, analysing the field of positivity that the eighteenth century termed 'wealth'; and by that term he too means objects of need – and thus the objects of a certain form of representation – representing themselves in the movements and methods of exchange. But within this duplication, and in order to regulate its laws – the units and measures of exchange – he formulates a principle of order that is irreducible to the analysis of representation: he unearths labour, that is, toil and time, the working-day that at once patterns and uses up man's life. The equivalence of the objects of desire is no longer established by the intermediary of other objects and other desires, but by a transition to that which is radically heterogeneous to them; if there is an order regulating the forms of wealth, if this can buy that, if gold is worth twice as much as silver, it is not because men have comparable desires; it is not because they experience the same hunger in their bodies, or because their hearts are all swayed by the same passions; it is because they are all subject to time, to toil, to weariness, and, in the last resort, to death itself. Men exchange because they experience needs and desires; but they are able to exchange and to order these exchanges because they are subjected to time and to the great exterior necessity. As for the fecundity of labour, it is not so much due to personal ability or to calculations of self-interest; it is based upon conditions that are also exterior to its representation: industrial progress, growing division of tasks, accumulation of capital, division of productive labour and non-productive labour. It is thus apparent how, with Adam Smith, reflection upon wealth begins to overflow the space assigned to it in the Classical age; then, it was lodged within 'ideology' – inside the analysis of representation; from now on, it is referred, diagonally as it were, to two domains which both escape the forms and laws of the decomposition of ideas: on the one hand, it is already pointing in the direction of an anthropology that will call into question man's very essence (his finitude, his relation with time, the imminence of death) and the object in which he invests his days of time and toil without being able to recognize in it the object of his immediate need; on the other, it indicates the still unfulfilled possibility of a political economy whose object would no longer be the exchange of wealth (and the interplay of representations which is its basis), but its real production: forms of labour and capital. It is

understandable how, between these newly formed positivities – an anthropology dealing with a man rendered alien to himself and an economics dealing with mechanisms exterior to human consciousness – Ideology, or the Analysis of representations, was soon to find itself reduced to being no more than a psychology, whereas opposite, in opposition, and soon to dominate ideology from its full height, there was to emerge the dimension of a possible history. From Smith onward, the time of economics was no longer to be the cyclical time of alternating impoverishment and wealth; nor the linear increase achieved by astute policies, constantly introducing slight increases in the amount of circulating specie so that they accelerated production at a faster rate than they raised prices; it was to be the interior time of an organic structure which grows in accordance with its own necessity and develops in accordance with autochthonous laws – the time of capital and production.

III THE ORGANIC STRUCTURE OF BEINGS

In the domain of natural history, the modifications observable between the years 1775 and 1795 are of the same type. The principle of classifications is not called in question: their aim is still to determine the 'character' that groups individuals and species into more general units, that distinguishes those units one from another, and that enables them to fit together to form a table in which all individuals and all groups, known or unknown, will have their appropriate place. These characters are drawn from the total representation of the individuals concerned; they are the analysis of that representation and make it possible, by representing those representations, to constitute an order; the general principles of *taxinomia* – the same principles that had determined the systems of Tournefort and Linnaeus and the method of Adanson – preserve the same kind of validity for A-L. de Jussieu, Vicq d'Azyr, Lamarck, and Candolle. Yet the technique that makes it possible to establish the character, the relation between visible structure and criteria of identity, are modified in just the same way as Adam Smith modified the relations of need or price. Throughout the eighteenth century, classifiers had been establishing character by comparing visible structures, that is, by correlating elements that were homogeneous (since each element, according to the ordering principle selected, could be used to represent all the others): the only difference lay in the fact that for the systematians the representative elements were fixed from