The Power of Maps

Shari Popen
Western Washington University

I think that if space is deed the "final frontier" then we are all in big trouble-at least in so far as social and political theory go. Perhaps the contemporary shift to metaphors of space as modes of intelligibility is architecture's triumph-the conquest of dense urban spaces and inhabited building by the principle of open space. It is not clear to me what 'a new kind of space" Schutz has in mind, because, like architectural space, it seems uninhabited and uninhabitable. I want to ask — where are the people?

Schutz engages us in "a theoretical effort that hopes to examine agency in schools." I am assuming he means "human agency?" But which humans? *Some* humans have had agency in what schools since done one. But I take it that Schutz wants particular humans to have agency. And wants it attached to a particular understanding of freedom. Both are, I think, rooted in *particular* Enlightenment notions, and so will continue to frustrate his understanding of the breaks that both Foucault and Arendt have made with the Enlightenment. His misreading of Foucault, and Arendt too, lead him to a shaky alliance with Giroux, but this too is perilous for a critical analysis of institutional power.

I find myself in a position, shared by David Halperin in his recent book titled *Saint Foucault*, vexed about the repeated misinterpretation of Foucault's project as a-political. Miller's view, especially, is not uncritically held. I agree with Schutz that Foucault would have rejected Giroux's approach to ground agency, and I think for good reason. But I am not sure that *reject* is an appropriate Foucauldian position. Not do I think Schutz gets Foucault quite right. I have a hard time reading Foucault as "fearing the space created by our normalized culture," as Schutz does. Likewise, total "escape" is just what Foucault denies is possible. Nor does the"cage of his self" imprison him.

Perhaps one needs to turn to his later works, especially *The History of Sexuality* and *The Care of the Self*, to get a fuller reading of Foucault's project. But I think it can be found earlier, too, especially in his article "The Subject and Power." Our present political struggles for liberation, Foucault says in that article, "all revolve around the question: Who are we? They are a refusal of these abstractions, of economic and ideological state violence which ignore who we are individually, and also a refusal of a scientific or administrative inquisition which determines who one is."[1] Society is normalized, but it is also normalizing, and Schutz pays little attention to *this* agency. At work is a "government of individualization," and it is against these normalizing techniques of power that Foucault locates the human acts of resistance. They are struggles, he says against the effects of power which are linked with knowledge, competence, and qualification: struggles against the privileges of knowledge. But they are, he says, "also an opposition against secrecy, deformation, and mystifying representations imposed on people."[2]

For Foucault, human "agency" or freedoms are not found by liberating the individual from the state, and from the states institutions, but by liberating both the individual and our institutions from the state, and from the type of individualization that is linked to the state. To resist this "governmentality" we have to promote new forms of subjectivity. For Foucault, we are not so much "imprisoned in our self" as we are trapped in our own history. Only a "politics of ourselves" will liberate us from the very specific historical forces of knowledge, truth and subjectivisation. Foucauldian human agency is always strategic, and an ongoing struggle within relations of power. He did not desire "absolute freedom" as Schutz claims, nor any transcendant form. I think it's more likely that any "victory" would signal the end of struggle, which must be ongoing, and therefore the end of freedom, that Foucault is "not interested."

The analysis of the forms of these historical forces cannot be reduced to a simple topographic mapping. Without seeing the significant of history in Foucault's — and in Arendt's — projects, we doom ourselves to miss altogether their casting of human agency. Foucault refers to his project as a "genealogy of ethics." The extended historical critique of the human sciences he draws for us can be better understood as a *subversion* of the Enlightenment story of agency, for the sake of making another ethos of the self available. I would venture to add that it is only when we adopt the attitude of an outlaw,' as do some post-colonial theorists, or as with Arendt, that of the pariah, that one can begin to fully approach the legacy of Foucault's project.

We can turn to Arendt, not I think because we need to be led out of a Foucauldian dilemma, but because in Arendt's work — as in Foucault's — we can see a movement towards an ethic for thought. Both Foucault and Arendt engage their work as a practice which takes seriously — and therefore actively, consciously, and passionately embodies — the ethical responsibility for intellectual inquiry. Their projects provide a possible escape from the technologies of governmentality within an intellectual space undernourished by ethical interrogation, not the obligatory conduct that I find in Giroux. The politicoethical substances of their work are able to resist the dualism of theory and practice because they are not composed of transcendent theories or ideologies, but of contingent practices — human, embodied, situated, contextualized practices for the conduct of intellectual pursuit, of practical action, and of self-constitution. In this practical sense, they both lead to human agency, but do not theorize it into a transcendence of the human condition.

Perhaps the work that most clearly dramatizes for me Arendt's affinity to Foucault's project is *Rahel Varnhagen.* Rahel, as Arendt narrates the story of her life, was a "Jew, stranded within a society that was rapidly disintegrating." She saw herself, Arendt tell us, "all blocked not be individuals and therefore removable obstacles, but by everything, by the world."[4] Rahel found herself to be a "being outside of history," as I think both Arendt and Foucault do. This historical alienation become the key, however, to Rahel's originality, to her agency. Their outlaw status is also the key to Arendt's and Foucault's critical thought. It is because they each experience themselves as outlaws — as pariahs in the face of social norms — that they are all forced to be, indeed freed to be, an individual. Arendt says of Rahel,

"having neither models nor tradition, she consequently had no real consciousness of what words belonged together and what did not. But she was really original."[5]

Human agency, for Rahel, was a consequence of the struggle against radical alienation within history as representation. But in the absence of representational history, life becomes art — not architecture — and ethics is bound less to morality than to aesthetics. Foucault, and I would argue Arendt too, proposes a philosophical ethos that is an aesthetics of existence. The center of this ethos is not the articulation of philosophical doctrines. It is the practice of the specific, which consciously embodies intellectual, and ethical interrogation and a self-formation that generates new options for moral and political possibility. The beauty of this existence, claims James Bernauer in his article on Foucault's "post-Auschwitz ethic…is to be located in a personal harmony of work and deed, not shaped in conformity to an ideal necessary order to self…but worthy because it shapes a presence from a multiplicity of truths personally confronted."[6]

Schutz leads us through Foucault and Arendt to Giroux. It is not clear to me still what "agency" is for Giroux, if it is political or ethical or both. I have at times found reading Giroux merely difficult, at others, impenetrable. What I found obscure in Giroux I unhappily find obscure in Schutz. Perhaps though I have been reading too much Foucault and Schutz too much Giroux. But there is a oral strain in both Giroux and Schutz that I detect — and resist. Schutz is right I think to say that Giroux is seeking to create "better" fields. And power for Giroux may be, as Schutz says, dynamic and multiple, but it does not stand up well to Foucault's more muscular analysis of power. For Foucault, power is not opposed to freedom, and freedom is not freedom *from* power. Freedom is instead a potentiality internal to power, even an effect of power. Power produces the possibilities of action, and the conditions for the exercise of freedom. What I stumble on in both Giroux and Schutz is not so much "remapping as resistance." but what kind of *individual* agency "cultural" remapping would promise. Maps are our ways of projecting power onto our human and physical landscapes, of colonizing them. On this point I think Foucault would agree. All three, Schutz too, are concerned about how the symbolic world constructs the conditions of their own moral and political agency.

Giroux's efforts can best — and most clearly — be read in a later work, *Fugitive Cultures*, in which he describes himself at an early age as "homeless in my own home." This could be Foucault or Arendt. For Giroux, he sees himself as homeless because of his working class background. "Lacking the security of a middle class childhood," he says, "my friends and I seemed suspended in a working class culture that neither accorded us a voice not guaranteed economic independence. Identify didn't come easy in my neighborhood."[7] In that work, Giroux turns to the emerging field of Cultural Studies, and its efforts to help map the outlaw status of youth and media culture.

But can Cultural Studies satisfy Giroux's — and Schutz's — hope? I know that Schutz has not mentioned Cultural Studies, but in invoking Giroux I think he has to be ready for it. Todd Gitlin, in the Spring issue of *Dissent*, finds much to worry about in Cultural Studies. Gitlin says about Cultural Studies that there is "conviction, elan,

passion" — energy at work. But he sees in Cultural Studies — as I see in Giroux and Schutz — not simply postmodern practices of struggle or resistance that Foucault and Arendt model — but the classic "star wars" contestation between forces of liberation and forces of established oppression. Gitlin traces this to the nostalgia of the failed 1960s Leftists, and to their longing for "eras of intelligible struggle." This nostalgia, he argues, has veered into populism, into a celebration of popular culture that is dangerous to intellectual thought on the Left. "It substitutes an obsession with popular culture for coherent political-economic thought."[8] Rather, we should ask ourselves, in Foucauldian fashion, for a historically situated explanation of the rise of Cultural Studies "in an era in which the forces of the right have held political and economic power longer and more consistently than at any other time in more than half a century."[9]

In the end, Giroux (and Schutz) cannot adequately promise us a "space" within which to actively challenge and interrogate our symbolic- and material-worlds. Space, as a category, remains unproblematized and unproblematic. There is little evident sense of the deep inscriptions of history. Nor do I agree with Schutz that Giroux leaves us "trapped within a restricted spatial imaginary." Giroux's call for educators to become public intellectuals and provocateurs again rings too hollow. There is too much Horace Mann in both Giroux and Schutz — too much moral crusading — for my Foucauldian tastes. However we may judge Foucault's and Arendt's work, they have both made it more difficult for us to think unhistorically, a-ethically, and nonpolitically — that is, irresponsibly. I commend Schutz for wading into deep waters with these three philosophical sharks, and would encourage him to draft his project with less romanticism about the world, and about itself, and to inhabit his categories more uneasily. Even, perhaps, to live more dangerously.

---

1. Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983), 212.

2. Ibid.

3. Hannah Arendt, *Rahal Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman*, 2d. ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace, Jovanovich, 1974), 6.

4. Ibid., 15.

5. Ibid., 34.

6. James M. Bernauer, "Beyond Life and Death: On Foucault's Post-Auschwitz Ethic," in *Michel Foucault Philosopher,* ed. Timothy J. Armstrong (New York: Routledge, 1992), 269.

7. Henry Giroux, *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence and Youth* (New York: Routledge, 1996) 4.

8. Todd Gitlin, "The Anti-Political Populism of Cultural Studies," *Dissent* (Spring 1997), 82.

9. Ibid., 81.