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Topic

The paradox of modern « pastorate »

Foucault's concepts of biopolitics and biopower are narrowly related to the notion of pastorate, considered as a very ancient form of power and rule over the livings (les vivants). In a well known text as "*Omnès et singulatim*: towards a critical assessment of political reason" (my translation...), Foucault defines this form of power, inherited, he says, from the ancient Hebrews (as opposed to the Greek tradition), as a benevolent conduct of the herd by a shepherd who is exerting his authority on a mass of living beings (the flock, animals at the origins), humans, in the "political" version of pastorate), rather than on a territory.

The interesting thing about this long lasting model (Foucault considers that it has been assumed and redeployed by Christianity) is its very asymmetric character: in its original form, the sheep are taken care of, they are all but subjects, they are "simple" living beings and the bare objects of the (wise or less wise) concern of the pastor for his herd. According to this primitive figure, the relationship between "rulers" and "ruled" (gouvernants et gouvernés) is quite unilateral: very few interactions can exist between the pastor to whom the responsibility for the herd can be entrusted, that is who embodies all kinds of eminent human qualities, and the herd which exists only as a collective living entity, deprived of any proper judgment or will. The discrepancy between both poles of this relationship of power is attested by the blatant contrast between the "human" sign on one side, the "animal" sign on the other (even when "human" herds are concerned).

Abstract

So, the question is: how can this very general figure or form of power become – through Christianity considered as an experimentation field and a fan belt of constantly renewed forms of practices related to pastorate – a model for modern power which, according to Foucault himself, supposes constant and intensive channels of interaction between "rulers" and "ruled", but also whose condition is the freedom of the latest (the "ruled"), that is their constant ability to resist to the action the rulers are trying to exert on them? In other words: if biopolitics and pastorate are so narrowly intertwined in contemporary societies, how can the human herd – *omnes et singulatim* – have access to the status of subject, being able to interact constantly with the pastor, to "falsify" many of his instructions and orders? The alleged advent of democracy is certainly not the answer to this disconcerting question: it is an open secret that our rulers, as well in Western Europe as in Far East countries are more of the "shepherd" type than of the people's sovereignty representative type. So, what we have to try to understand is how the human herd has become "clever", so clever that it has lost any respect for the pastor – this, without escaping from his condition as a herd. What Foucault names biopolitics is the environment in which this disturbing paradox prospers: the human herd's level of education and, let's say, sophistication, is constantly growing, without being able to get rid of the original "stain" – the mark of the "other" (the animal, being ruled as a part of the herd).