

In a Materialist Way  
Selected Essays by Pierre Macherey



EDITED BY WARREN MONTAG

Translated by Ted Stolze



VERSO  
London • New York



First published by Verso 1998  
This edition © Verso 1998  
Translation © Ted Stolze 1998  
Introduction © Warren Montag 1998  
All rights reserved

The rights of Pierre Macherey, Warren Montag and Ted Stolze to be identified respectively as the author, editor and translator of this work have been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

**Verso**  
UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1V 3HR  
USA: 180 Varick Street, New York NY 10014-4606

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN 1-85984-949-0

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**  
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Typeset by SetSystems, Saffron Walden, Essex  
Printed by Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn and Guildford

---

---

## Contents

---

---

Acknowledgments	vii
Notes on Abbreviations and Original Sources	ix
I Introduction by Warren Montag	1
II In a Materialist Way	15
1 <i>Soutenance</i>	17
2 Philosophy as Operation	28
3 For a Theory of Literary Reproduction	42
III Philosophy à la française	53
4 The Hegelian Lure: Lacan as Reader of Hegel	55
5 At the Sources of <i>Histoire de la folie</i> : A Rectification and its Limits	77
6 Foucault: Ethics and Subjectivity	96
7 From Canguilhem to Canguilhem by Way of Foucault	108
IV Spinoza	117
8 Deleuze in Spinoza	119
9 Spinoza's Philosophical Actuality (Heidegger, Adorno, Foucault)	125
10 Spinoza, the End of History, and the Ruse of Reason	136
V Appendix (1964)	159
11 Georges Canguilhem's Philosophy of Science: Epistemology and History of Science	161
Bibliography	189
Index	195



## From Canguilhem to Canguilhem by Way of Foucault

Aside from the personal and particular considerations that lead us to relate the theoretical approaches of Georges Canguilhem and Michel Foucault, such a connection is justified above all for one basic reason: these two bodies of thought have developed around a reflection devoted to the problem of norms; reflection in the strong, philosophical, sense of the expression, even if in these two authors it has been directly associated with the use of materials borrowed from the history of the biological and human sciences and from social and political history. Whence this common questioning which, in very general terms, could be formulated as follows: Why is human existence confronted with norms? From where do norms derive their power? And in what direction do norms orient this power?

For Canguilhem these questions take shape around the concept of "negative values," taken from Bachelard and reworked. This point is clarified in an exemplary way by the conclusion to the article "Vie" in the *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, which, on the basis of a reference to the death drive, states this thesis: life becomes known, and recognized, only through the errors of life that, in every living thing, reveal its constitutive incompleteness. And this is why the power of norms becomes apparent at the moment that it trips over, and eventually falls at, the limits it cannot pass and toward which it is thus indefinitely returned. In this sense, before quoting Borges at length, Canguilhem presents the question: "Is not the value of life, along with the acknowledgement of life as a value, rooted in knowledge of its essential precariousness?"<sup>1</sup>

The problems that are thus at stake will be here placed in a narrowly delimited framework, on the basis of a parallel reading of the two works of Canguilhem and Foucault that address precisely this question: the intrinsic relationship of life to death, or of the living to the mortal, such as it is experienced on the basis of the clinical experience of illness. To begin, let us briefly recall in what chronological space this confrontation

is deployed: in 1943 Canguilhem published his medical thesis, *Essai sur quelques problèmes concernant le normal et la pathologique*; in 1963, "twenty years later," in the "Galien" collection, devoted to the history and philosophy of biology and medicine, which he directed at the Presses Universitaires de France, Canguilhem published Foucault's second great work after *Histoire de la folie: Naissance de la clinique*; the same year, at the Sorbonne he offered a course on norms, preparing the reedition, in 1966, of the *Essai* of 1943, combined with *Nouvelles réflexions concernant le normal et le pathologique*. Let us rehearse the successive stages of this journey.

The 1943 *Essai* opposes the objectifying perspective of a positivistic biology—at that time represented in an exemplary way in the works of Claude Bernard—to the actual reality of illness: the latter having essentially the value of a problem presented to the individual and by the individual, on the occasion of the failures of his own existence, a problem taken charge of by a medicine which is not first a science, but an art of life, illuminated by the concrete consciousness of this problem considered as such, apart from attempts at solutions which try to suppress it.

This entire analysis revolves around a central concept: that of the "living," the subject of an "experience"—this notion is found throughout the *Essai*—through which it is exposed, in an intermittent and permanent way, to the possibility of suffering, and more generally, of living badly. From this perspective, the living simultaneously represents two things: it is first the individual or the living being, grasped in its existential singularity, as it is revealed in a privileged way by the conscious lived experience of illness; but it is also what one could call the living of the living, that polarized movement of life which, in every living thing, pushes it to develop to the maximum what there is in it that is or exists. In this latter aspect, no doubt one can find a Bergsonian inspiration; but one could equally see in it, although Canguilhem does not himself mention the possibility of such a connection, the shadow cast by the Spinozist concept of *conatus*.

This living (thing) is defined by the fact that it is the bearer of an "experience," which itself appears simultaneously under two forms: a conscious and an unconscious form. The first part of the *Essai*, in opposition to the procedures of the biologist who tries to turn him into a laboratory object, insists above all on the fact that the sick person is a conscious subject, by striving to express what makes him feel his experience by declaring his disease through the lived lesson that links him to the doctor; in this sense, Canguilhem writes, referring to Leriche's conceptions: "We think that there is nothing in science that has not first appeared in the consciousness, and that . . . it is particularly the sick man's point of view which forms the basis of truth."<sup>2</sup> But the second part of the *Essai* takes up the same analysis by deepening it, which leads to the rooting of the experience of the living in a region situated short of or at

the limits of consciousness, where is affirmed, in a confrontation with the obstacles opposed to its complete disappearance, what we have just called the living of the living, and which Canguilhem also designates as being a "spontaneous effort, peculiar to life,"<sup>3</sup> an effort that is spontaneous and thus prior—and perhaps external—to its conscious reflection: "... we ask ourselves how the normativity essential to human consciousness would be explained if it did not in some way exist in embryo in life."<sup>4</sup>

Emphasizing this "experience," with its two dimensions—conscious and unconscious—leads, in opposition to the objectivism characteristic of a positivistic biology willfully ignorant of the values of life, to the following conclusion: "It seems to us that physiology rather than searching for an objective definition of the normal, ought better to recognize the original normativity of life."<sup>5</sup> Which means that since norms are not objective data, and as such directly observable, the phenomena to which they give rise are not the static phenomena of a "normality," but the dynamic phenomena of a "normativity." One sees that the term "experience" here again finds a new meaning: that of an impetus which tends toward a result without any guarantee of attaining or maintaining it; it is the erratic being of the living, subject to an infinity of experiences, that is in the case of the human living thing the positive source of all its activities.

Thus the traditional perspective concerning the relationship of life and norms is reversed: it is not life that is subjected to norms, the latter acting on it from outside; but it is norms that are produced by life's very movement in a completely immanent way. Such is the central thesis of the *Essai*: there is an essential normativity of the living, the creator of norms which are the expression of its constitutive polarity. These norms account for the fact that the living is not reducible to a material datum but is a possibility, in the sense of a power, that is, a reality which is given from the beginning as incomplete because it is confronted intermittently with the risks of illness, and the risk of death permanently.

To read *Naissance de la clinique*, the book published in 1963 by Michel Foucault under the authority of Georges Canguilhem, is to note shared views without excluding the difference, indeed the opposition, of points of view. These two works criticize on all sides biological positivism's claim of objectivity. We have just seen that Canguilhem had carried out this critique by committing himself to the side of the concrete experience of the living, and thus had been led to open up a perspective on the play of norms which could be called phenomenological, grasped at the point that it issues from the essential normativity of life.

But for the consideration of this essential origin, Foucault substitutes that of a historical "birth," situated precisely within the development of

a social and political process: he is thus led to carry out an "archaeology"—the opposite of a phenomenology—of medical norms, seen from the side of and even from behind the doctor, from the side of medical institutions much more than from the side of the sick person, who thus appears as the great absence in *Naissance de la clinique*. In this way Foucault explains the deployment of a medical space in which illness is subjected to a simultaneously normed and norming "gaze," which determines the conditions of normality by being subjected to those of a common normativity:

Medicine must no longer be confined to a body of techniques for curing ill and of the knowledge that they require; it will also embrace a knowledge of *healthy man*, that is, a study of *non-sick man* and a definition of the *model man*. In the ordering of human existence it assumes a normative posture, which authorizes it not only to distribute advice as to healthy life, but also to dictate the standards for physical and moral relations of the individual and of the society in which he lives.<sup>6</sup>

It might be said that the living has ceased to be the subject of normativity in order to become no more than the point of application, if Foucault did not practically erase from his analyses every reference to the notion of the living, which is as rare in *Naissance de la clinique* as it is frequent in the 1943 *Essai*. It is at this cost that a genesis of normality—in the dual sense of an epistemological model, governing knowledges, and of a political model, governing behaviours—can be presented.

The concept of "experience" recurs as often in Foucault's analyses as in Canguilhem's; but, in relation to the requirement formulated by Foucault of "taking things in their structural severity,"<sup>7</sup> this concept is given an entirely different meaning. It is no longer a question of an experience of the living, in all the meanings this expression can have, but of a historical experience, simultaneously anonymous and collective, from which the completely deindividualized figure of the clinic is freed. Thus, what Foucault calls "clinical experience" proceeds at several levels at once: it is what allows the doctor to perfect his experience, by putting him in contact with experience through the mediation of observation (the "medical gaze"), and this within the institutional framework that determines a socially recognized and controlled experience. In the preceding sentence, the term "experience" intervenes in three positions and with different meanings: the correlation of these positions and these meanings precisely defines the structure of clinical experience.

This is the triangle of experience: at one vertex, the sick person occupies the place of the object gazed upon; at another vertex, one finds the doctor, a member of a "body," the medical body, recognized as competent in order to become the subject of the medical gaze; finally, the third position is that of the institution that makes official and socially legitim-

izes the relation of the object gazed upon to the gazing subject. Thus one sees that the play of the "said" and the "seen" through which such an "experience" is established passes over the sick person and the doctor himself, in order to realize this *a priori* historical form which anticipates the concrete lived experience of the illness by imposing its own models of recognition on it.

This analysis profoundly differs, and perhaps even diverges, from the analysis presented by Canguilhem in his *Essai* of 1943. And yet, in an unexpected way, it leads to some rather similar conclusions. For clinical experience as it has just been characterized, at the same time that it offers the sick person a perspective of survival by restoring him to a normal state whose criteria it itself defines, the latter being validated only after the fact by the constructions of objective knowledge—this experience confronts the sick person with the risk and the necessity of a death which then appears as the secret or the truth of life, if not as its principle. This is Bichat's lesson, laid out in chapter 8 of the *Naissance de la clinique*, which Canguilhem has often cited.

It is thus the historical structuring of clinical experience that establishes the great equation of the living and the mortal: it inserts morbid processes into an organic space whose representation is precisely informed by the conditions that promote this experience; and these conditions, by virtue of their historicity itself, are not reducible to a biological nature which is immediately given in itself, as an object permanently offered to a knowledge whose truth values would be by this fact unconditioned.

This is why the concern to describe the vicissitudes of the doctor/patient duo in terms of encounter, distance, or "understanding" should be left to phenomenologies... At the original level takes shape the complex figure that a psychology—even depth psychology—is hardly able to master; since pathological anatomy, the doctor and patient are no longer two correlative and external elements, like subject and object, observer and observed, eye and surface; their contact is only possible on the basis of a structure in which the medical and pathological belong to the interior in the fullness of the organism... The open and externalized corpse is the internal truth of disease; it is the displayed depth of the doctor/patient relation.<sup>8</sup>

In the conditions that make the clinical experience possible, death—and with it life, too—ceases to be an ontological or existential absolute, and simultaneously acquires an epistemological dimension: as paradoxical as this might seem, death "clarifies" life.

It is from the height of death that one can see and analyse organic dependences and pathological sequences. Instead of being what it had so long been, the night in which life disappeared, in which even the disease becomes blurred, it is now endowed with that great power of elucidation that dominates and reveals both the space of the organism and the time of the disease.<sup>9</sup>

Let us note that it is here regarding Bichat that, with a view to relativizing the content, *Naissance de la clinique* makes one of its very rare references to the notion of the "living":

The irreducibility of the living to the mechanical or chemical is secondary only in relation to the fundamental link between life and death. Vitalism appears against the background of this "mortalism."<sup>10</sup>

For this reason, to decompose this clinical experience by revealing the structure that supports it is also to expose the rules of a kind of art of living, in relation to everything included under the notions of health and normality, the latter no longer having anything to do with the representation of what Canguilhem would himself call a "biological innocence." And one could see here the outline of what, in his final writings, Foucault will call an "aesthetics of existence," so as to explain how one defies norms by playing with them, that is, by making them function, and at the same time by opening up the margin of initiative that frees their "play." This art of living presupposes, on the part of one who exercises it, that he knows himself to be mortal and that he learns how to die: Foucault also developed this idea during the same year 1963 in his work on Raymond Roussel, in which the experience of language to some extent has taken the place of clinical experience.

In 1963, at the same time he read Foucault's book, Canguilhem reread himself and prepared his *Nouvelles réflexions*, which would be published three years later. In this later text Canguilhem does not cease to insist on the fact that he sees no reason to return to the theses he had sustained in 1943 in order to inflect or depart from them. But if this is really so, how can one explain the necessity of presenting these reflections, in which it was indeed necessary that something "new" come to light?

Yet their novelty first of all has to do with the fact that these reflections again present the question of norms by shifting it to another ground, which considerably enlarges the field of functioning of norms. To put it briefly, this enlargement proceeds from the vital toward the social. Whence this question which is in fact found at the centre of the *Nouvelles réflexions*: can the effort to think the norm on the basis of normativity instead of on the basis of normality—which had characterized the 1943 *Essai*—perhaps be extended from the vital to the social, in particular when all the phenomena of normalization concerning human labour and the products of this labour have been taken into account?

On the whole, the response to this question would be negative, owing to the impossibility demonstrated by Canguilhem of inferring from the vital to the social, that is, of aligning the functioning of a society in general, in so far as it carries out a project of normalization, with that of an organism. In this argument, one can see a resurgence of the traditional

debate between internal finality and external finality. Does this mean that it would be necessary to distinguish radically between two types of norms, by refusing to favour either the vital or the social?

Yet to this last question, the response will also be in the negative—essentially for two reasons. First, the *Nouvelles réflexions* emphasize the fact that vital norms, in the world of man at least—and isn't man the being who tends to make all things enter into his own world?—are not the expression of a natural "vitality," abstract because strictly confined within its order, whereas these norms express an effort to surpass this order, an effort having meaning only because it is socially conditioned. On the other hand, the *Nouvelles réflexions* also present the idea of a social normativity, proceeding by means of the "invention of organs,"<sup>11</sup> in the technical sense of the term invention. This suggests the necessity of overturning the relationship of the vital to the social: it is not the vital that imposes its unsurpassable model on the social, as the metaphors of organicism would have us believe; but it is rather, in the human world, the social that draws the vital before itself, if only because one of the "organs" that pertains to its "invention" is the knowledge of the vital itself, a knowledge that is social in its principle.

To think norms and their action is thus to reflect a relation of the vital and the social which is not reducible to a unilateral causal determinism. This evokes the very particular status of the concept of the "knowledge of life" in Canguilhem, who used it, of course, as the title of one of his books.<sup>12</sup> This concept corresponds simultaneously to the knowledge one may have of the subject of life considered as an object, and to the knowledge produced by life which, as subject, promotes the act of knowledge and confers its values on it. That is, life is neither completely object nor completely subject, nor is it entirely intentional consciousness, nor is it matter to be worked on, unconscious of the impulses at work on it. But life is power, that is, as we said at the beginning, incompleteness: and this is why it is experienced only by being confronted with "negative values."

The following can be read at the end of the *Nouvelles réflexions*: "It is in the rage of guilt as in the clamor of suffering that innocence and health arise as the terms of a regression as impossible as it is sought after."<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault could perhaps have written this sentence to illustrate the inevitable myths of normality: those myths which, through their idealized expression, speak of nothing but suffering and death, that is, of the threat that reminds every living thing of itself, both of its individuality of living and of its living of living.

### Notes

1. Canguilhem 1994, 90.
2. Canguilhem 1989, 92-3.
3. *Ibid.*, 126.
4. *Ibid.*, 127.
5. *Ibid.*, 178. (Translation modified.)
6. Foucault 1973, 34. (In this essay Macheroy quotes from the first edition of *Naissance de la clinique*, published in 1963. Unfortunately, the English translation, which appeared in 1973 as *Birth of the Clinic*, was based on the revised second edition of *Naissance*, published in 1972. When possible, then, I have used the English translation; otherwise, I have translated directly from the original French. Trans.)
7. Foucault 1963, 138. (This phrase appears only in the first edition of *Naissance*. Trans.)
8. *Ibid.* (These sentences appear only in the first edition of *Naissance*. Trans.)
9. *Ibid.*, 144.
10. *Ibid.*, 145.
11. Canguilhem 1989, 253.
12. *I.e.*, *La connaissance de la vie* (1952). (Trans.)
13. Canguilhem 1989, 243.