The Signature of All Things

On Method

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CHAPTER ONE

What Is a Paradigm?

In the course of my research, I have written on certain figures such as homo sacer, the Muselmann, the state of exception, and the concentration camp. While these are all actual historical phenomena, I nonetheless treated them as paradigms whose role was to constitute and make intelligible a broader historical-problematic context. Because this approach has generated a few misunderstandings, especially for those who thought, in more or less good faith, that my intention was to offer merely historiographical theses or reconstructions, I must pause here and reflect on the meaning and function of the use of paradigms in philosophy and the human sciences.

Foucault frequently used the term “paradigm” in his writings, even though he never defined it precisely. Nonetheless, in The Archaeology of Knowledge and subsequent works, in order to distinguish the objects of his investigations from those of the historical disciplines, he designated them with terms like “positivity,” “problematization,” “discursive formation,” “apparatus,” and, more generally, “knowledge.” In a May 1978 lecture at the Société Française de Philosophie, he defines “knowledge” thus: “The use of the word knowledge (savoir) . . . refers to all procedures and all effects of knowledge (connaissance) which are acceptable at a given point in time and in a specific domain.” In order to clarify the necessary relation of the concept of knowledge to that of power,
Foucault added these comments: "For nothing can exist as an element of knowledge if, on one hand, it does not conform to a set of rules and constraints characteristic, for example, of a given type of scientific discourse in a given period, and if, on the other hand, it does not possess the effects of coercion or simply the incentives peculiar to what is scientifically validated or simply rational or simply generally accepted."[n]

As others have noted, these concepts are analogous to Thomas S. Kuhn’s notion of “scientific paradigms,” introduced in his book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, for example, argue that although Foucault never thematized the function of paradigms, “his current work clearly follows a course that uses these insights, if not the words themselves. He is now proceeding through a description of discourse as the historical articulation of a paradigm, and approaching analytics in a manner that is heavily dependent on the isolation and description of social paradigms and their practical applications.”[n]

Yet Foucault, who declared that he had read Kuhn’s “admirable and definitive” book only after he had completed *The Order of Things*, almost never refers to it, and even seems to distance himself from Kuhn.[n] In his 1978 introduction to the American edition of Georges Canguilhem’s *The Normal and the Pathological*, Foucault writes: “This norm cannot be identified with a theoretical structure or an actual paradigm because today’s scientific truth is itself only an episode of it—let us say provisional at most. It is not by depending on a ‘normal science’ in T.S. Kuhn’s sense that one can return to the past and validly trace its history: it is rediscovering the ‘norm’ process, the actual knowledge of which is only one moment of it.”[n]

It is therefore necessary first of all to reflect on whether the analogy between these two different methods does not correspond to different problems, strategies, and inquiries and whether the “paradigm” of Foucault’s archaeology is not merely a homonym for that which, according to Kuhn, marks the emergence of scientific revolutions.

2

Kuhn recognized that he had used the concept of “paradigm” in two different senses.[n] The first meaning of “paradigm,” which he proposes to replace with the term “disciplinary matrix,” designates the common possessions of the members of a certain scientific community, namely, the set of techniques, models, and values to which the group members more or less consciously adhere. The second meaning refers to a single element within the set, such as Isaac Newton’s *Principia* or Ptolemy’s *Almagest*, that serves as a common example and thus replaces explicit rules and permits the formulation of a specific and coherent tradition of inquiry.

When Kuhn elaborated on Ludwik Fleck’s concept of “thought style” (*Denkstil*) and the distinction between what is and what is not pertinent within a “thought collective” (*Denkkollektive*), he sought, through the concept of the paradigm, to examine what makes possible the constitution of a normal science, that is, a science capable of determining which problems within a specific community are scientific or not. Normal science does not then mean one governed by a precise and coherent system of rules. On the contrary, if the rules are derived from paradigms, then paradigms can “determine normal science” even in the absence of rules.* This is the second meaning of the concept of paradigm, which Kuhn considers “most novel.”[n] A paradigm is simply an example, a single case that by its repeatability acquires the capacity to model tacitly the behavior and research practices of scientists. The empire of the rule, understood as the canon of scientificity, is thus replaced by that of the paradigm; the universal logic of the law is replaced by the specific and singular logic.
of the example. And when an old paradigm is replaced by a new paradigm that is no longer compatible with the previous one, what Kuhn calls a scientific revolution occurs.

Foucault constantly sought to abandon traditional analyses of power that were grounded on juridical and institutional models as well as on universal categories (of law, the state, the theory of sovereignty). He focused instead on the concrete mechanisms through which power penetrates the very bodies of subjects and thereby governs their forms of life. Here the analogy with Kuhn’s paradigms seems to find an important corroboration. Just as Kuhn set aside the identification and examination of the rules constituting a normal science in order to focus on the paradigms that determine scientists’ behavior, Foucault questioned the traditional primacy of the juridical models of the theory of power in order to bring to the fore multiple disciplines and political techniques through which the state integrates the care of the life of individuals within its confines. And just as Kuhn separated normal science from the system of rules that define it, Foucault frequently distinguished “normalization,” which characterizes disciplinary power, from the juridical system of legal procedures.

If the proximity of these two methods seems clear, then it is all the more enigmatic why Foucault remained silent when it came to Kuhn’s work and seems to have carefully avoided using the very term “paradigm” in the The Archaeology of Knowledge. To be sure, the reasons for Foucault’s silence may have been personal. In his reply to George Steiner, who had reproached him for not mentioning Kuhn by name, Foucault explains that he had read Kuhn’s book only after he had completed The Order of Things and adds: “I therefore did not cite Kuhn, but the historian of science who molded and inspired his thought: Georges Canguilhem.”

This statement is surprising, to say the least, since Kuhn, who did acknowledge in the preface to The Structure of Scientific Revolutions his debt to two French epistemologists, Alexandre Koyré and Émile Meyerson, does not once mention Canguilhem in the book. Since Foucault must have meant what he said, perhaps his close relationship to Canguilhem prompted him to repay Kuhn for this discourtesy. However, even if Foucault was not above holding personal grudges, this alone cannot explain his silence concerning Kuhn.

A closer reading of Foucault’s writings shows that even without naming the American epistemologist, he did on more than one occasion grapple with Kuhn’s notion of paradigm. In “Truth and Power,” Foucault’s 1976 interview with Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino, when answering a question concerning the notion of discontinuity, he explicitly opposed his notion of the “discursive regime” to that of the paradigm:

Thus, it is not a change of content (refutation of old errors, recovery of old truths), nor is it a change of theoretical form (renewal of a paradigm, modification of systematic ensembles). It is a question of what governs statements, and the way in which they govern each other so as to constitute a set of propositions that are scientifically acceptable and, hence, capable of being verified or falsified by scientific procedures. In short, there is a problem of the regime, the politics of the scientific statement. At this level, it’s not so much a matter of knowing what external power imposes itself on science as of what effects of power circulate among scientific statements, what constitutes, as it were, their internal regime of power, and how and why at certain moments that regime undergoes a global modification.
call "epistemological figures" or "thresholds of epistemologization." Thus he writes: "When in the operation of a discursive formation, a group of statements is articulated, claims to validate (even unsuccessfully) norms of verification and coherence, and when it exercises a dominant function (as a model, a critique, or a verification) over knowledge, we will say that the discursive formation crosses a threshold of epistemologization. When the epistemological figure thus outlined obeys a number of formal criteria...."3

The change in terminology is not merely formal: in a manner wholly consistent with the premises of The Archaeology of Knowledge, Foucault diverts attention from the criteria that permit the constitution of a normal science with respect to subjects (the members of a scientific community) to the pure occurrence of "groups of statements" and "figures," independently of any reference to subjects ("a group of statements is articulated," "the epistemological figure thus outlined"). And when, a propos of the different types of history of science, Foucault defines his own concept of the episteme, it is once again not a matter of identifying something like a worldview or a structure of thought that imposes common postulates and norms on the subject. Rather, the episteme is the "total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems."3 Unlike Kuhn's paradigm, the episteme does not define what is knowable in a given period, but what is implicit in the fact that a given discursive or epistemological figure exists at all: "In the enigma of scientific discourse, what the analysis of the episteme questions is not its right to be a science, but the fact that it exists."4

The Archaeology of Knowledge has been read as a manifesto of historiographical discontinuity. Whether this characterization is correct or not (Foucault contested it a number of times), it is certain that in this book Foucault appears most interested in
that which permits the constitution of contexts and groups, in the positive existence of "figures" and series. Only that these contexts emerge in accordance with an entirely peculiar epistemological model which coincides neither with those commonly accepted in historical research nor with Kuhnian paradigms, and which we must therefore undertake to identify.

5

Consider the notion of panopticism, which Foucault presents in the third part of *Discipline and Punish*. The panopticon is a particular historical phenomenon, an architectural model published by Jeremy Bentham in Dublin in 1791 under the title *Panopticon*; or, *The Inspection-House: Containing the Idea of a New Principle of Construction, Applicable to Any Sort of Establishment, in Which Persons of Any Description Are to Be Kept Under Inspection*. Foucault recalls its basic features:

We know the principle on which it was based: at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres.²⁵

Yet for Foucault, the panopticon is both a "generalizable model of functioning," namely "panopticism," that is to say, the principle of an "ensemble," and the "panoptic modality of power." As such, it is a "figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use"; it is not merely a "dream building," but "the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form."²⁶ In short, the panopticon functions as a paradigm in the strict sense: it is a singular object that, standing equally for all others of the same class, defines the intelligibility of the group of which it is a part and which, at the same time, it constitutes. Anyone who has read *Discipline and Punish* knows not only how the panopticon, situated as it is at the end of the section on discipline, performs a decisive strategic function for the understanding of the disciplinary modality of power, but also how it becomes something like the epistemological figure that, in defining the disciplinary universe of modernity, also marks the threshold over which it passes into the societies of control.

This is not an isolated case in Foucault's work. On the contrary, one could say that in this sense paradigms define the most characteristic gesture of Foucault's method. The great confinement, the confession, the investigation, the examination, the care of the self: these are all singular historical phenomena that Foucault treats as paradigms, and this is what constitutes his specific intervention into the field of historiography. Paradigms establish a broader problematic context that they both constitute and make intelligible.

Daniel S. Milo has remarked that Foucault demonstrates the relevance of contexts produced by metaphorical fields in contrast to those created only through chronological caesurae.²⁷ Following the orientations of such works as Marc Bloch's *Royal Touch*, Ernst Kantorowicz's *King's Two Bodies*, and Lucien Febvre's *Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century*, Foucault is said to have freed historiography from the exclusive domain of metonymic contexts—for example, the eighteenth-century or southern France—in order to return metaphorical contexts to primacy.
This observation is correct only if one keeps in mind that for Foucault, it is a question not of metaphors but of paradigms in the sense noted above. Paradigms obey not the logic of the metaphorical transfer of meaning but the analogical logic of the example. Here we are not dealing with a signifier that is extended to designate heterogeneous phenomena by virtue of the same semantic structure; more akin to allegory than to metaphor, the paradigm is a singular case that is isolated from its context only insofar as, by exhibiting its own singularity, it makes intelligible a new ensemble, whose homogeneity it itself constitutes. That is to say, to give an example is a complex act which supposes that the term functioning as a paradigm is deactivated from its normal use, not in order to be moved into another context but, on the contrary, to present the canon—the rule—of that use, which can not be shown in any other way.

Sextus Pompeius Festus informs us that the Romans distinguished exemplar from exemplum. The exemplar can be observed by the senses (oculis conspicitur) and refers to that which one must imitate (exemplar est quod simile faciamus). The exemplum, on the other hand, demands a more complex evaluation (which is not merely sensible: animo a estimatur); its meaning is above all moral and intellectual. The Foucauldian paradigm is both of these things: not only an exemplar and model, which imposes the constitution of a normal science, but also and above all an exemplum, which allows statements and discursive practices to be gathered into a new intelligible ensemble and in a new problematic context.

The locus classicus of the epistemology of the example is in Aristotle’s Prior Analytics. There, Aristotle distinguishes the procedure by way of paradigms from induction and deduction. “It is clear,”
At this point, let us try to put in the form of theses some of the features that, according to our analysis, define a paradigm:

1. A paradigm is a form of knowledge that is neither inductive nor deductive but analogical. It moves from singularity to singularity.

2. By neutralizing the dichotomy between the general and the particular, it replaces a dichotomous logic with a bipolar analogical model.

3. The paradigmatic case becomes such by suspending and, at the same time, exposing its belonging to the group, so that it is never possible to separate its exemplarity from its singularity.

4. The paradigmatic group is never presupposed by the paradigms; rather, it is immanent in them.

5. In the paradigm, there is no origin or archê; every phenomenon is the origin, every image archaic.

6. The historicity of the paradigm lies neither in diachrony nor in synchrony but in a crossing of the two.

At this point, I think it is clear what it means to work by way of paradigms for both me and Foucault. *Homo sacer* and the concentration camp, the *Musselmann* and the state of exception, and, more recently, the Trinitarian *oikonomia* and acclamations are not hypotheses through which I intended to explain modernity by tracing it back to something like a cause or historical origin. On the contrary, as their very multiplicity might have signaled, each time it was a matter of paradigms whose aim was to make intelligible series of phenomena whose kinship had eluded or could elude the historian's gaze. To be sure, my investigations, like those of Foucault, have an archaeological character, and the phenomena with which they deal unfold across time and therefore
require an attention to documents and diachrony that cannot but follow the laws of historical philology. Nevertheless, the archē they reach—and this perhaps holds for all historical inquiry—is not an origin presupposed in time. Rather, locating itself at the crossing of diachrony and synchrony, it makes the inquirer’s present intelligible as much as the past of his or her object. Archaeology, then, is always a paradigmatology, and the capacity to recognize and articulate paradigms defines the rank of the inquirer no less than does his or her ability to examine the documents of an archive. In the final analysis, the paradigm determines the very possibility of producing in the midst of the chronological archive—which in itself is inert—the plans de clivage (as French epistemologists call them) that alone make it legible.

If one asks whether the paradigmatic character lies in things themselves or in the mind of the inquirer, my response must be that the question itself makes no sense. The intelligibility in question in the paradigm has an ontological character. It refers not to the cognitive relation between subject and object but to being. There is, then, a paradigmatic ontology. And I know of no better definition of it than the one contained in a poem by Wallace Stevens titled “Description Without Place”:

   It is possible that to seem—it is to be,
   As the sun is something seeming and it is.

   The sun is an example. What it seems
   It is and in such seeming all things are.