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# The normal and the biological: a note on Georges Canguilhem

Colin Gordon

In the introduction to *Idéologie et rationalité*, Georges Canguilhem remarks on the fact that "Bachelard has become known to Italian, Spanish, German and even English language readers more by way of translations of critical commentaries – notably those of Dominique Lecourt – than by translations of the epistemological works themselves" (1). Canguilhem's own writings have, until now, met with an identical fate, at least as far as English is concerned. A couple of footnotes in *Reading Capital* sufficed for Canguilhem's works to be, as it were, read into the minutes of recent theoretical discussions without (generally speaking) themselves actually having been read. This unsatisfactory state of affairs is happily soon due to alter with the forthcoming translation of *The Normal and the Pathological* (2). Nevertheless, it deserves a moment's reflection.

Dominique Lecourt's brief but informative essay on Canguilhem perceptively summarises a number of what are now fairly familiar features of his approach to the history and philosophy of science: the rejection of 'teleologies of reason', the criticism of the notion of 'precursors' in science, the distinction between a word and a concept, the highlighting of the role of conflict and conjuncture in scientific advance. It is not however altogether surprising if this reading leaves us rather better informed about Canguilhem's method than about his matter: in the first place, the Althusserians' discussion of the history of the sciences was manifestly dominated by the objectives of their analogical quest for the elements of a theory of the scientificity of Marxism; and, conversely, since Lysenko the subject of the biological *per se* (as distinct from the challenge posed by conservative biologicistic ideologies) has been something of a no-go area for Marxists. (It is noteworthy that those syntheses of Marx and Freud which come closest to suggesting something like a socialist 'philosophy of life' tend to make a point of purging Freud's doctrine of its grosser biological component, the theory of the instincts.)

Considerable as Canguilhem's virtues as an epistemologist indeed are, however, their recognition ought not to blind us to the possibility which the substantive results of his analyses offer us of re-opening some important and neglected areas of discussion. Canguilhem, it is worth pointing out, has never been an exponent of the kind of closure of philosophy effected by the theoreticians of theoretical practice. There is in fact little in his work which answers to Dominique Lecourt's evocation of a "liberation struggle against the philosophy of the philosophers" (3). His interest is directed much more towards a historical study of the reciprocal linkages between the intrinsic terms of biological research and a cognate domain of philosophical questions concerning the sense of biological knowledge. It is in large measure Canguilhem's illuminating re-reading of philosophical literature from Plato to Bergson which gives his discussions of the relations between the biological and the social, between the biological and the technical, and between life and knowledge of life their remarkable precision and force (4). As Canguilhem's article 'What is psychology?' shows, this approach is not calculated to preclude or undervalue the possibility of a philosophically grounded political 'critique' (both theoretical and practical) (5).

Two connected aspects of this enterprise have disquieted Canguilhem's Althusserian commentators. Lecourt, following Macherey, endorses Canguilhem's 'vitalist' philosophy of the biological insofar as it can be read as an anti-metaphysical polemic, but criticises what he calls the "theoretical 'short-circuit'" which, positing a "line of descent from life to the concept via the mediation of the concept of life", takes Canguilhem in the direction of "the camp of empiricist theories of knowledge" and "a 'biologistic' conception of history itself" (6).

The standing political objection to biological philosophies concerns (roughly speaking) their complicity either with an organic sociology of order (Comte) or an evolutionist valorisation of social inequalities (neo-Darwinism). I will try to suggest why Canguilhem's conception of the biological differs from these philosophies and has different consequences. "A science is a discourse normed (*normé*) by its critical rectification" (7): for Canguilhem the normative interest constitutive of biological science is one which is fulfilled to the degree that its concepts become adequate to what he calls an 'objective *a priori*': the intrinsic normativity of living beings. (This is Lecourt's 'short-circuit'.) This conception of life as a "normative activity" (8) is counterposed by Canguilhem to that of the nineteenth-century Comtian physiology which accorded priority to the quantitative definition of biological norms. Canguilhem asserts the biological primacy of the normative over the normal. "The term 'normative' is applied in philosophy to any judgement which assesses or qualifies a fact in relation to a norm, but at bottom this mode of judgement is subordinate to the person who institutes the norms. In its fullest sense, normative means that which institutes norms. And it is in this sense that we propose to speak of

a biological normativity". "Man does not feel in good health – which is the definition of health – except when feeling not only normal – adapted to his milieu and its demands – but normative, capable that is of pursuing new norms of life". "The ill person is ill by his incapacity to tolerate more than a single norm . . . not abnormal because of the absence of a norm, but because of the incapacity to be normative" (9).

Canguilhem establishes a connection between positivism's conception of the normal and its conception of science: "the theory in question corresponds to the humanist conviction that man's action on the milieu and on himself can and must become entirely transparent to the knowledge of the milieu and of man, and must in normal conditions be nothing other than the application of previously instituted sciences" (10). His book makes it clear that this correlation is not only a matter of the ideological transposition of motifs between biology and sociology: it is bound up in a concrete, albeit complex manner with the history of economic, political and technological practices. Canguilhem's history of the biological deals not only with the concepts of the normal, the norm and the normative but with the history of practices of normalisation – in early modern France, the passage "from grammatical norms, by way of industrial and hygienic norms, to the morphological norms of men and horses established for the ends of national defence". "Between 1759, the date of the appearance of the word '*normal*', and 1834, the date of appearance of the word '*normalisé*', a normative class conquered the power to identify – through a fine example of ideological illusion – the function of social norms with the use if made of those norms whose content it itself determined" (11).

This perspective, which anticipates and intersects at a number of points with such studies by Michel Foucault as *The Birth of the Clinic*, does not issue in a biologicistic philosophy of history; rather it shows us something of how the history of biology, all proper attention paid to its conceptual autonomy, acts on and is acted on by the general history of our societies. Perhaps the insights offered by Canguilhem's critical philosophy of the biological can be seen as converging with Foucault's recent suggestion that the 'species-being' of human beings in industrial societies has become a principal and explicit object of the exercise of power. If so, it may not be over-fanciful to go on to consider whether one of the tasks of contemporary political analysis might not be that of elaborating a new 'politics of life'.

## Notes and References

1. Paris: Vrin, 1977, pp.20-21.
2. Publishing details of this are unavailable at present; they will be given in our next issue. The essay by Michel Foucault which follows is a version of his Introduction to this translation.

3. 'Georges Canguilhem's Epistemological History', in *Marxism and Epistemology*. London: NLB, 1975, p.165. (This has a useful Bibliography.)
4. Cf. notably the essays in *La Connaissance de la Vie*, Paris: Vrin, 1975, Part III.
5. Cf. 'Mort de l'Homme ou Epuisement du Cogito?', *Critique*, Paris 1967, pp.600-618, esp. pp.616-7; *Vie et Mort de Jean Cavailles*, 1976, passim.
6. Op. cit. pp. 185-6.
7. *Idéologie et Rationalité*, p.21.
8. *Le Normal et le Pathologique*, Paris: P.U.F. 1975, p.77.
9. Ibid. pp.77, 132-3, 122.
10. Ibid. p.62.
11. Ibid. p.182-4.

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