

Time to give up fascist tactics

by Eric M. Pollard

This is very hard for me to write. It forces me to squarely confront my past actions and to accept responsibility for the damage I have had a part in causing.

I sincerely apologize for my involvement in and my founding of the AIDS activist organization ACT UP/D.C. I have helped to create a truly fascist organization that I now believe to be among the greatest threats to our freedom and the healing of our people.

For many people, ACT UP seems to be an hallucination of anger and power unleashed, the incarnation of instigation and radical political change. For me, this was precisely the idea. The decision to create ACT UP/D.C. was conceived when I and another early member attended an OUT! rally. I had taken copious amounts of LSD. We were impressed with the energy, and with the self-righteous anger of the crowd.

We conspired to bring into existence an activist group that would work exclusively on AIDS issues and that would go further and press harder for radical changes in AIDS treatments than any other existing organization. We needed a group that was fearless because it had nothing to lose, that would be loosely structured without hierarchical leaders, that could effectively exploit the media for its own ends, and that would work covertly and break the law with impunity.

We needed an organization that was loud and brazen, one that got listened to because people were actually afraid of what we might do next if we were ignored. We desired an ACT UP here like what was happening in New York and San Francisco. Under the influence of powerful, illicit drugs, it really seemed like a good idea.

And it worked for awhile. About 30 people responded to an original call to arms via an advertisement placed in the *City Paper*. Another member and I traveled to New York to receive training and a thousand bucks from ACT UP/N.Y. I remember standing in front of about 600 people crammed into the basement of the New York Gay Community Center, microphone in hand, vowing that they would not stand alone in their fight against AIDS, that we would rally the troops in our nation's capital to support this needed endeavor. The salad days of ACT UP were an empowering time and place to be. We truly had the sense that united and visible, we could have a voice in ending this epidemic.

But our reception in this town was cold, apart from the few predictable, disgruntled activist types. The average Gay man or woman could not immediately relate to our subversive tactics, drawn largely from the voluminous *Mein Kampf*, which some of us studied as a working model. As ACT UP/D.C. grew, we struck intently and surgically into whatever institution we believed to stand in our way, including this newspaper for what we felt was inadequate coverage. And we justified our methods with the consolation that they were unfortunately necessary in order to precipitate a higher good for our people: "Let us do evil that good may come."

But now, nearly two years later, I recognize the error in this line of think-

ing. I look at our community and see it split into warring factions that are growing increasingly possessive of their clergy and violent in their aggression. I see more and more extremely toxic chemicals, legal and illegal, being ingested by our people without sufficient testing — in order to satisfy the demands of ACT UP. I see the activist groups' refusal to allow a forum of free thought and dissent, and individuals such as *New Republic* editor Andrew Sullivan, Whitman-Walker Clinic Administrator Jim Graham, and others attacked and assassinated in person and in print simply because they acted as autonomous thinkers and have attempted, correctly or otherwise, to help and lead our people. I am witnessing the bodies of my friends grow sicker and sicker, and their desperation grow. And that desperation has brought with it a most severe fascism.

I've learned that the means to this end are every bit as sacred and important as the end itself, that the means by which we come together to heal ourselves are as vital to our healing as our envisioned end result. I have left ACT UP, more correctly, they have thrown me out for insisting on the viability of individual dissent. If we cannot agree to disagree, there is truly no elective community to speak of.

I reiterate my apology to all of you who read this. My intentions were glorious and well made. Neither myself nor anyone else in ACT UP ever meant to hurt our people's very process of self-discovery and communication, though I think this is the lamentable status quo. ACT UP has achieved some great things, urged some considerable changes both politically and in the way we accomplish our medical research, and I believe we can achieve more. But I implore the remaining members of ACT UP/D.C. to desist in the execution of this enforceable fascism you so heartily believe to be in our best interests. I am as guilty as you, more so, but now I realize that unless we can be at least civilized beasts, there is no hope in seeking our healing.

A friend of mine once asked me what I and ACT UP would do when the AIDS crisis was over. I told him that our struggle was specific and tangible, and that we didn't seek the reigns of power for anything other than self-preservation. "You know, Eric," he said, "there's nothing more conservative than a radical group come to power."

It's time for us to come down from this hazy-minded "bad trip" and preserve our community by respecting our diversity of individual perspectives.

Despite our many mistakes, ACT UP was not founded to be an agency for the enforcement of politically correct thought and behavior, but to start and precipitate the discussion, to challenge insights, and to transmit the message crisis. If we allow our organizations to take on this absolutist bent, if we continue to attack each other with vitriol instead of reason, then we will truly be acting up in a "Queer Nation" not worth living in. Or, perhaps more tragic, not worth fighting for.

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A Philosopher's Death Wish

The Passion of Michel Foucault.
By James Miller. 491 pages.
Simon & Schuster. \$27.50.

In 1983, Michel Foucault was immersed in the life of Saint Anthony, the early Christian desert hermit whose regimen of rigorous self-denial had so moved the youthful Augustine that he gave up his lusty ways and converted to Christianity. At the same time, Foucault, perhaps the most influential thinker of his era, was also luxuriating in the leather scene of San Francisco. Paradoxical? No, postmodernist. Through drugs and sadomasochistic eroticism, Foucault was concluding his Nietzschean quest for self-transcendence



RAYMOND DEPARDON—MAGNUM

A reckless will to power: Foucault in 1978

in a form that mimicked the saint's equally tortured discipline of the flesh. Hence the religious connotation of Miller's title. A year later Foucault died of AIDS at the age of 57. The moral question that drives Miller's bold and brilliant reconstruction of Foucault's life and thought is this: did the philosopher deliberately risk his life—and others'—in a terminal demonstration of his own insatiable "will to power"?

Foucault's untimely death shocked his fellow Parisians. In France, and among many American academics, he was widely regarded as the most dazzling mind of his generation. Like Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and other celebrated thinkers, Foucault exploded the pretensions of Enlightenment humanism and rationality. But where others deconstructed the printed page, Foucault, with seemingly

cool detachment, dissected institutions—hospitals, prisons and sanitariums—arguing that it is society, not individuals, that is sick, mad and guilty. Like other French critics, he insisted that the individual, himself included, had been erased by post-Enlightenment culture. But unlike his intellectual peers, Foucault regarded his philosophic probes into the destructive use of power, moral surveillance and sexual codes as necessary steps in the release of his own body and its Dionysian desires. Not the least of Miller's many important insights is that Foucault's display of impersonal erudition was a pose. As Foucault himself once asserted in a typical gnomic utterance, one writes to "get free of oneself."

Mystical aura: Free of what? As we learn from Miller's doggedly American insistence on interpreting the philosopher's writing in light of his private life, Foucault hated his authoritarian father and resented the Roman Catholic school he was sent to as a youth. Several times as a university student in Paris he attempted suicide. As Miller, director of Liberal Studies at New York's New School for Social Research, notes, a preoccupation with death as the door to true selfhood hovers like a mystical aura around all Foucault's philosophical investigations. In middle age, he privately determined to invent—by hazarding what he called "limit experiences"—a passionate affirmation of his own embodied "truth" as a homosexual. "To die for the love of boys," he once told a friend. "What could be more beautiful?"

Through sex, Foucault had longed to achieve an epiphany of will, beyond the dichotomies of reason and madness, good and evil, body and mind. His gateway experience was an acid trip during a 1975 overnight excursion to California's Death Valley. There followed the clandestine rounds of the gay baths. In a literally painstaking hermeneutics of S&M techniques, Miller explains how Foucault's fatal flirtation with death during bouts of alternating pain and pleasure offered him the estatic experience that had become his Nietzschean holy grail. Miller's argument is persuasive: Foucault scripted his own death as the philosophical conclusion to a life of intellectual and moral risk. That he ignored the risk of infecting others to achieve his own ends calls for stringent re-evaluation of his entire philosophical project. But the French, still loath to admit that their intellectual idol died of AIDS, will probably find this bio-degrading biography difficult to accept.

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