Al-Jahiz and Michel Foucault on Power Relations in Oral Debates

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to shed light on a striking similarity between the ideas of two major thinkers: al-Jahiz and Michel Foucault. Although they belong to very different historical, political and intellectual contexts, this article shows that their views of power in debates and polemics are very similar. However, given the very complicated nature of the intellectual projects of the two thinkers, this article does not claim to provide a comprehensive comparative study, and therefore , it is mostly descriptive in nature, attempting to show how al-Jahiz's and Foucault's accounts of oral debates are similar despite of the different backgrounds.

Keywords: .Foucault, Al-Jahiz, debate, orality, polemics, writing

Introduction: Context and Relevance

"nimium altercando veritas amittitur"
(In too much disputing, truth is apt to be lost)
- Publius Syrus

This saying by the Latin writer Publius Syrus in the 1st century BC appears to embody the diagnosis of the 21st century digital age, where it is commonplace to commend, praise, and at times glorify the technological achievements that gave people a 'voice' in discussions of political, social, and intellectual matters. The socio-digital sphere is filled with opinions and replies to these opinions, followed by a 'thread' of other replies and comments.

Even if this 'thread' uses the written word as a medium, it seems to resemble oral discussions much more than the traditional forms of writing (books, essays, research papers, etc.). The more provocative the opinion, the more replies and media attention are invited. The more heated a debate, the more public interest it generates followed by an attempt to determine who has 'won' or 'lost'. All the contemporary reader/writer needs in order to engage in discussions, disputes, and debates is a good internet connection. This allows him/her to comment on all forms of opinion-giving: on books, articles, videotaped lectures, films, documentaries, election debates, religious debates, talk shows, Facebook and Twitter posts, thus becoming part of a virtual, impromptu discussion group. Everything is easily transmitted and shared, generating the assumption that such 'transmission of knowledge' is a good thing; that it has made the pursuit of 'truth' easier; and that 'sharing' these pursuits with many, many participants yields good results for society. This very assumption has itself been contested and debated. For example, there is the recent obsession with the idea of 'false news', leading governments to build digital platforms to separate 'fact' from 'rumour', in what seems to be an endless struggle to stop what The Times and The Sunday Times have recently described as 'hysteria' in their recent campaign: "Politics Tamed".

Upon hearing the two great names, "al-Jahiz" and "Foucault", linked to the theme of debating and polemics, it is easy to romanticize 9th century Baghdad and 20th century Paris and assume that the two thinkers lived in purer societies where such 'hysteria' was non-existent. Although in both contexts debates were, indeed, forms of knowledge-transmission, argument-building, and thought-provoking, it was particularly interesting for the present author to find that both thinkers – known for their abilities to discuss and debate - have argued against the importance of oral debates, polemics and competitive discussions. Both seem to have reacted against a situation where truth was being lost in the midst of disputing, and both

have valued writing more highly as an epistemological medium. Both thinkers have diagnosed the problem as one of 'power' (Foucault) or '*ghalaba*' (Jahiz); as a certain kind of force which clouds the pure pursuit of truth.

In a 1984 interview, Paul Rabinow asks Foucault: "Why is it that you don't engage in polemics"? (Rabinow 1984: 381). Foucault's answer, unsurprisingly, focused on two aspects: the search for truth, and the relation to the other (ibid: 381). Despite the different contexts, the 9th century Arab thinker al-Jahiz wrote in his encyclopedia *al-Ḥawaya:n* (Book of Living), [1] in favour of writing as opposed to oral discussions (al-Jahiz 1996 1:84-85). The reasons he gives for problematizing orality are very similar to Foucault's. Like Foucault, al-Jahiz also focuses on power relations and the search for truth, although he naturally uses different terminology.

This article compares the two texts, explaining how they are similar. It discusses the two authors' views of books and writing in general, and why they have preferred them to oral debates and perceived the latter as a problem for knowledge and the search for truth. Although comparing a classical Arab or Muslim thinker to a modern European one, with or without the existence of clear historical links, is still an ongoing academic quest for reasons I have outlined in an earlier paper (reference after review), the comparison of al-Jahiz and Foucault is not a chartered territory. Therefore, the following article aims to begin the discussion by offering an example of the similarity of their arguments concerning oral debates and power; a subject which no doubt has relevance to the epistemological problems of our digital age. It is true that this age is more concerned with 'truth' and 'power' in their more direct, superficial meanings (news, facts, information, government, leadership, etc.). The 'hysteria', however, sometimes expands to comprise both concepts in their more delicate philosophical, theological, and psychological connotations, especially when the topic under discussion is socio-religious, and when the virtual discussion group comprises intellectuals. Does this mean that the contemporary digital sphere is not much different from the oral sphere which al-Jahiz and Foucault found problematic? Yes, perhaps. Also, both thinkers seem to have considered the pursuit of 'power' as a human condition or a form of existence, making their ideas possible in various centuries, despite apparent differences.

The comparison begins with Foucault's argument followed by al-Jahiz's. This historical reversal does not contain a conscious discourse, but it has been merely chosen for a technical reason: to ease the transition from French concepts and ideas translated widely into English, to Arabic concepts and their – possible – English translations, much less widely translated and used. Beginning with al-Jahiz would have risked the assumption that al-Jahiz scholarship is as advanced as Foucault scholarship, and that the translations of the former's works are not 'still in the making'. Placing his texts *after* Foucault's hopes to keep the door open for comments on the similarities viewed by the present author depending on their understanding of al-Jahiz's texts and their choice of translation, given that there is still much scholarly work needed on al-Jahiz's views of power and their possible similarities with the concept as understood by Foucault.

Foucault's problematization of oral 'games'
Orality as a 'Restricted Universe'

Many Foucault readers have watched his debate with Noam Chomsky which appeared on a Dutch television program on the subject of "Human Nature: Justice vs. Power" (See Rabinow 1984: 3-7). Foucault's ability to debate did not, however, mean that he liked what he was doing. In the interview conducted by Rabinow, he answers the question on why he does not engage in polemics, by first stating that he does, indeed, like discussions and tries to answer questions, but if he opens a book where the author is accusing an adversary of infantile leftism for example, he shuts it "right away", for he does not belong "to the world of people who do things that way" (Rabinow 1984: 381).

Foucault's problem with polemics stems from two standpoints: the search for truth and the relation to the other (ibid: 381). This problem seems to exist, for Foucault, in any "dialogue situation" or a "serious play of questions and answers" where "the rights of each person are in some sense immanent in the discussion" (ibid.: 381). The dialogue affects the relation between the two speakers and the relation to the truth. The situation gives them 'rights' that they 'exercise'. The

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[1] I use this recent, revisionist translation by James E. Montgomery (Montgomery 2013), instead of the earlier translation as 'Book of Animals'. I find Montgomery's translation to be accurately reflective of the richness and complexity of *al-Ḥawaya:n*.

person asking the questions:

… is merely exercising the right that has been given him: to remain unconvinced, to perceive a contradiction, to require more information, to emphasize different postulates, to point out faulty reasoning, and so on. (ibid: 381)

The person who answers the questions is also limited by the discussion:

He is tied to what he has said earlier, and by the acceptance of dialogue he is tied to the questioning of other. Questions and answers depend on a *game* – a *game* that is at once pleasant and difficult – in which each of the two partners takes pains to use only the rights given him by the other and by the accepted form of dialogue. (ibid: 381. Italics mine.)

The dialogue form is thus a "game", where the participants exercise rights, determining what they will say, therefore placing them away from the pursuit of truth. The person who answers the questions is tied to the "logic of his own discourse" (ibid: 381); to his expected coherence; to the necessary absence of contradiction in his discourse; and of course to the questions he is asked. He is a player where the dialogue "situation" is itself a form of power, restricting the players' exercise in thinking and the quest for knowledge.

In his introduction to *Speech Begins after Death*, Foucault's conversation with Claude Bonnefoy (Foucault 2013: 1-22), Philippe Artières suggests that Foucault's interviews "serve as genuine speech experiments" (ibid: 15). His only "dialogue" with a contemporary philosopher was with Deleuze, "if we exclude the debate with Noam Chomsky that took place on Dutch television, but which failed, turning into two parallel monologues" (ibid: 17). This is Artières's view, for whom Foucault's dialogue with Deleuze "is interesting because it is a genuine exercise in thinking" (ibid: 17; see also Foucault and Deleuze 1977: 205-217).

If thinking and the search for truth are threatened by the dialogue form, unless the latter becomes itself an exercise in thinking; an exercise where the participants are aware of the exiting power-relations, how does that affect the speech itself? An example from Foucault's "conversation" with Bonnefoy is telling. The former begins by asking Foucault a "preliminary" question about the interview genre, to which Foucault answers by saying that he has "stage fright" (Foucault 2013: 25): "At bottom, I don't really know why I'm apprehensive about these interviews, why I'm afraid of not being able to get through them" (ibid: 25). He then starts to "wonder" whether nor not it is because he is an academic used to certain forms of speech, or whether it is because he is not very "familiar" with the interview genre:

I think that people who move more easily than I do in the world of speech, for whom the universe of speech is an *unrestricted universe, without barriers, without preexisting institutions, without borders, without limits*, are completely at ease with the interview format and don't dwell on the problem of knowing what it's about or what they're going to say. I imagine them as being permeated by language and that the presence of a microphone, the presence of a questioner, the presence of a future book made from the very words they're in the process of uttering doesn't impress them very much and that in this space of speech that is open to them, they feel completely free. Not me! And I wonder that sort of things I'm going to be able to say (ibid: 26-27; Italics mine).

Speech, discussions, dialogues, polemics, debates all represent for Foucault a restricted universe, with barriers, with preexisting institutions, with borders and limits. In his interview with Rabinow, he goes further and uses a war metaphor for polemics, which is exactly how al-Jahiz conceptualizes debates as will be explained shortly. The polemicist, Foucault states, possesses privileges in advance and never agrees to question them (Rabinow 1984: 382). The warrior-status of the polemicist is emphasized in the following quote, which is strikingly similar to another by al-Jahiz which I will quote in the next section:

On principle, he possesses rights authorizing him to wage war and making that struggle a just undertaking; the person he confronts is not a partner in search for the truth but an adversary, an enemy who is wrong, who is armful, and whose very existence constitutes a threat (ibid: 382).

Foucault, again, emphasizes that this situation is a "game" in which the person is abolished as interlocutor from any possible dialogue, and is deprived the right to speak and his recognition as a "subject" (see ibid: 382). In *The Order of Things*, Foucault objected to such deprivation when arguing against being described as a 'structuralist'. His conceptualization of a 'subject' involves a degree of freedom which such a description – or any description or

categorization – limits, restricts or even suffocates. In replying rather angrily to such a categorization, he described those who labelled him a structuralist as "half-witted 'commentators'" with "tiny minds" (Foucault 2001: xv). He calls on the 'more serious public' to 'free' him from that connection, making it more obvious that he wants to keep his writing 'free'. He phrases this desire in *The Archeology of Knowledge* this way: "Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write." (Foucault 2002: 19).

It is possible to understand Foucault's standpoint by looking at how he describes the second volume of *The History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure* as an "essay". In the introduction he emphasizes that the 'essay' is the "living substance of pshilosophy" if it is understood to mean 'assay' or 'test' "by which, in the game of truth, one undergoes changes" and *not* as "the simplistic appropriation of others for the purpose of communication" (Foucault 1998: 9). In a nostalgic tone, Foucault adds that this is possible if philosophy "is still what it was in the past, i.e. an "ascesis", *askēsis*, an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought" (ibid: 9).

This 'exercise of the self' is not possible in a dialogue situation. The final objective is not thinking, but is merely about "the triumph of the just cause" that the polemicist "has been manifestly upholding from the beginning", while relying "on a legitimacy that his adversary is by definition denied." (Rabinow 1984: 382). Polemics is thus an act of war, not a search for truth. Like discussions in general, it is a "game", where rights are given or denied, and where "triumphs" have nothing to do with an exercise in thinking, but with the success in playing by the rules, which are fixed, predetermined, setting the speakers as warriors rather than subjects. For this, Foucault considers polemics "a parasitic figure on discussion and an obstacle for the search for the truth" (ibid: 382).

The Unrestricted Silence of Writing

As opposed to orality, Foucault gives "writing" another metaphor, far from war. In his interview with Bonnefoy, Foucault explains that his *initial* depreciation of writing stems from having been raised in a provincial medical family still belonging to the 19th century (Foucault 2013: 33). The physician, especially the surgeon (meaning his father), "isn't someone who speaks, he's someone who listens" (ibid: 35). The surgeon "does so to cut through the speech of the other and reach the silent truth of the body"; he "doesn't speak, he acts, that is, he feels, he intervenes"; he only speaks a few words of diagnosis and therapy and operates in silence (ibid: 35).

Foucault explains that despite his "conversion" from the depreciation of speech, he may have retained a number of connections to his childhood (where the father is a silent surgeon), explaining why some of his readers find that there is something "aggressive" about his writing (ibid: 38). But for him, writing remains "an extremely gentle activity, hushed": "I get the impression of velvet when I write. For me, the idea of a velvety writing is a familiar theme, at the limit of the affective and the perceptive, which continues to haunt my writing project" (ibid:38). His readers, however, find his writing to be "dry and mordant" at times, and Foucault thinks they're right (ibid: 39):

Upon reflection, I think they're right. I imagine that there's an old memory of the scalpel in my pen. Maybe, after all, I trace on the whiteness of the paper the same aggressive signs that my father traced on the bodies of other when he was operating? I've transformed the scalpel into a pen. I've gone from the efficacy of healing to the inefficacy of free speech; for the scar on the body I've substituted graffiti on paper; for the ineradicability of the scar I've substituted the perfectly eradicable and expungeable sign of writing. Maybe I should go further. For me the sheet of paper may be the body of the other (ibid.).

With this metaphor, Foucault gives writing an epistemological status not present in oral discussions. Even his aggression in writing, he thinks of as a surgical procedure:

With my writing I survey the body of others, I incise it, I lift the ligaments and skin, I try to find the organs and, in exposing them, reveal the site of the lesion, the seat of pain, that something that has characterized their life, their though, and which, in its negativity, has finally organized everything they've been. The venomous heart of things and men is, at bottom, what I've always tried to expose (ibid: 40-41).

Through writing Foucault tries to escape the dynamic of what he has repeatedly described as 'power relations', which negatively impacts his own idea of what knowledge is. In general, he views 'knowledge' as something derived from these power relations rather than the subject of knowledge itself (Sheridan 1980: 220). The fact that he views all knowledge to be political; cannot be pure or neutral; has its conditions of possibility in power relations (ibid: 220), makes his own attempt to write - an attempt which has been repeatedly accused of difficulty and vagueness, especially by Chomsky- a rebellion against power or an attempt of escaping any system of knowledge which asks him – as in polemics – what he is or what it is he is trying to say.

Perhaps this attempt to escape is related to why Foucault would not even call himself a philosopher, a historian of sociologist, but "a doctor" or a "diagnostician": "I want to make a diagnosis and my work consists in revealing, through the incision of writing, something that might be the truth of what is dead" (Foucault 2013: 45). This truth is only revealed through writing:

Writing consists essentially of doing something that allows me to discover something I hadn't seen initially. When I begin to write an essay or a book, or anything, I don't really know where it's going to lead or where it'll end up or what I'm going to show. I only discover what I have to show in the actual movement of writing, as if writing specifically meant diagnosing what I had wanted to say at the very moment I begin to write (ibid: 46).

It is interesting the extent to which Foucault tries to free his writing activity from any limits, even those of intention. He considers writing an almost successful attempt to hide his face in the business of the activity of diagnosing, exactly like a silent physician; something which speaking fails to accomplish (ibid: 46, 66). Even if writing fails to absorb what he describes as the "teeming life in the motionless swarm of letters" (ibid: 67), the obligation to write still exists. Foucault describes it as an "obligation without pleasure":

To obey an obligation whose origin is unknown, and the source of whose authority over us is equally unknown, to obey that – certainly narcissistic – law that weighs down on you, that hangs over you wherever you are, that, I think, is the pleasure of writing (ibid: 68)

Indeed, this is a very poetic way to think about writing and to explain why it is different from speaking and how it relates to truth. If there is power in writing, it is "unknown", and if there is aggression, it is a "diagnosis". In polemics, power is dogma, and aggression is theatre (see Rabinow 1984: 382-383). In writing, the face of the writer is hidden, and others are assumed dead, therefore there is no game, or rights given and denied. In writing there are no expectations or predetermined rules, which is why, for Foucault, it is the ultimate exercise in thinking and the search for truth.

In the next section, I will explain how Foucault's statements are very similar to al-Jahiz's views of speaking and debating as opposed to writing. Al-Jahiz, however, did not exactly consider debating and polemics to be completely parasitic as Foucault does, but tries to move these activities to the space of writing. Like Foucault, al-Jahiz finds that the human obsession with power and victory is less present in writing, wherein thinking can be more directed towards understanding and the search for truth.

Al-Jahiz's problematization of '*ghalaba*' in oral debates
Books as a 'Private' Debate

In his recent book *Al-Jahiz: in Praise of Books*, James Montgomery gives a detailed account of the intellectual and political circumstances surrounding al-Jahiz's praise of books, especially in his magnum opus *al-Ḥayawa:n*. The main question, relevant to this article, is posed by Montgomery early in his book: Why would al-Jahiz, "a master of the dialectical method of thinking about God and reality (material and moral) known as *Kalām*" (Montgomary 2013:4), write in defense of books as opposed to "oral forms of disseminating knowledge"? (ibid: 5). Montgomery discusses the changes in Abbasid society that made al-Jahiz's position possible and made books become an obsession, including the proliferation of new types of knowledge, i.e. the translations of Greek and Indian science and philosophy, and the introduction of paper-techniques especially the refinement of rag-paper (ibid: 4). Montgomery also places al-Jahiz's idea in the context of Caliph al-Mutawakkil's forbidding of public debate on the Qur'an, thus endangering "the public pursuit

of the dialectical method for ascertaining the truth which al-Jahiz considered central to the religious well-being of his society" (ibid: 55). Montgomery suggests that al-Jahiz, as a *Kala:m* Master in which debate is a central tool and is predominantly an oral activity, found the solution by writing *al-Ḥayawa:n*, having the new technology in mind (ibid: 38-39). Montgomery's conclusion is that:

…al-Jāḥiẓ designed his book to save society from the competitive strife in which argument and debate had engulfed it. Debate could now be internalized in the soul of the reader. This was made possible because books encouraged solitary reading and interior debate. (ibid: 7).

Montgomery further explains that:

His contemporaries and he were also keen members of a salon culture of informed debate, impassioned discussion and erudite conversation. In *The Book of Living* al-Jāḥiẓ took debate out of the public domain, enclosed it in book format, and encouraged his readers and audience to cultivate the practice of debating with the self in private. (ibid: 40).

He sought to keep *Kalām* alive by making his book a locus of debate. Prior to the *Book of Living*, books had of course been polemical. They had espoused one side or another of a particular debate on an issue. Al-Jāḥiẓ wrote many examples … What was new about *The Book of Living* was that it encouraged its readers to debate the pros and cons of reading the signs of God's creation with themselves. Debate was to be internalized in their souls. (ibid: 56).

Gregor Schoeler explains that in the 9th century both 'recitation for listeners' and 'the book for a reading public' existed side by side as "instruments of mediating knowledge" (Schoeler 2009: 51). In the previous century, orality was much more popular as a medium. The 9th century Abbasid context is therefore different in its enthusiasm for writing as a new form necessary for knowledge from the 20th century European context in which Michel Foucault stood against debate and polemics and considered them to be obstacles to the activity of thinking.

Al-Jahiz praises books because they promote social well-being as "they do not quarrel with you or try to deceive you" (Montgomery's paraphrase 2013: 161; *al-Ḥayawa:n* 1: 40-42.). Foucault has the well-being of society in mind as he censures debate in its judiciary, political and religious models: "…polemics sets itself the task of determining the intangible point of dogma, the fundamental and necessary principle that the adversary has neglected, ignored or transgressed; and it denounces this negligence as a moral failing; at the root of the error, it finds passion." (Rabinow 1984: 382). In the political model in particular, polemics "defines alliances, recruits partisans, unites interests or opinions, represents a party; it establishes the other as an enemy, an upholder of opposed interests." (ibid: 382).

3.2 The Love of Victory: Similarities with Foucault

Al-Jahiz and Foucault share the view that "competitive" passions in debate have negative effects on society and the search for truth. A passage which is "recycled" in al-Jahiz's corpus – to use Montgomery's expression – shows the extent of the similarity between the two thinkers' views of debate. As Montgomery found (Montgomery 2013: 209), the passage occurs, with minor differences. in *al-Ḥayawan* (*Al-Hayawa:n* 1:84-85); in *Risa:la ila ibn Abi: DuɁa:d* (*Rasa:Ɂil al-Jahiz* 1964: 1:315-316); and in *al-Jawa:bat wa istiḥqa:q al-Ima:ma* (*The Responses and Meriting of the Imamate*) (*Rasa:Ɂil* 4:296). Montgomery translates the passage from *Epistle to ibn Abi Du'ad in Which he informs him about the Treatise on Legal Verdicts*. I will quote it in full to demonstrate its striking similarity to Foucault's argument. Montgomery argues that this passage presents "in a nutshell" al-Jahiz's "psychological analysis for promoting books over debates" (Montgomery 2013: 209):

One of the thankful features of understanding (*maʿrifa*) how people go astray and how they follow the right course, and what harms and helps them, is that you can shoulder the heavy burden of providing them with instruction (*taʿrīf*) on this, and you can undertake to guide them aright, even if they do not understand the excellence of the benefit they are being given. Nothing preserves knowledge (ʿilm) like being generous with it. **N**othing hastens it like scattering it. However, the reading of a book is more effective means of providing good guidance than when they meet one another. When people meet one another there is an increase in doing wrong to one another, the will to help one's comrade is excessive and burning zealory (*ḥamīya*) grows intense. In face-to-face encounters, the love of victory (*ḥubb al-ghalaba*) is excessive and the desire (*shahwa*) for vainglory and leadership, along with being ashamed to retreat and pride (*anafa*) at humiliation. Out of all of this, hatreds are

occasioned and division (*tabāyun*) becomes apparent. Wen men's hearts assume this attribute (*ṣifa*) and constitution (*ḥilya*), they are resistant to understanding (*maʿrifa*) and are blind to indications (*dalāla*). Books offer no reason (*ʿilla*) which would prevent people from attaining the desired aim and hitting upon the probative argument (*ḥujja*), because when someone reads in solitude and is alone when comprehends (*fahm*) their ideas, he does not seek to vanquish himself or to score a victory over his reasoning intellect. (Montgomery 2013: 203-205).

The similarities are clear. Foucault speaks of wars being waged in debates where subjects become enemies, and al-Jahiz speaks of "face to face" encounters which awaken desires for victory and cause division. Al-Jahiz's debater is no different from Foucault's; he is genuinely afraid of contradicting himself and of the humiliation of being defeated. An oral debate for al-Jahiz is indeed a "game" where the search for truth and knowledge is threatened by the "love of victory" (*ḥubb al-ghalaba*); a concept which can indeed be compared to Foucault's well-known accounts of power. The solution is books, i.e. the written form of thinking and communicating in solitude where the reader is similar to Foucault's writer who does not, in al-Jahiz's words, "seek to vanquish himself". Foucault's writer is humble: he hides his face and enjoys the velvety experience. In solitude, the reader/writer is not in a game or a struggle, because at the other end stands his own reasoning intellect (*ʿaql*), and not another person or adversary blinded by the desire for vainglory, scared of humiliation, and is unable to retreat from his own argument. In solitude there is a capacity to retreat, because the debate is internalized according to Montgomery, and therefore understanding (*fahm*) and knowledge (*maʿrifa*) become more attainable.

3.3 Writing in Contemporary 'Theatres': Can there be truth?

Foucault phrases the vast distance between polemics and truth as follows: "Has anyone ever seen a new idea come out of a polemic?" (Rabinow 1984: 383). He insists that all polemical practices are nothing more than theater, a war-theater, a comedy where the consequences have "sterilizing effects" (ibid: 383). The mimicry of war and battles puts forward so much as one's killer instinct as possible. But it is really dangerous to make anyone believe that he can gain access to the truth by such paths and thus to validate, even if in a merely symbolic form, the real political practices that could be warranted by it. (ibid: 383)

Foucault warns of the dangers of polemical acts, even if they are theater, and al-Jahiz warns of the "burning zealory" (*ḥami:ya*) which increases the chance of people doing wrong to one another in face-to-face encounters (*tala:qi*). As mentioned in the Introduction of this article. it would be particularly interesting to investigate the claims of both thinkers in the context of 21st century social media and networking platforms. Montgomery in his preface likens the 9th century book-market of Baghdad to our contemporary digital world which is "filled with words" (Montgomery 2013: 3). The question is whether conversing through printed words rather than face-to-face has decreased the effects of the "love of victory" and the "burning zealory", or whether Foucault's comic theater has merely taken the platform of the written, making his and al-Jahiz's poetic statements on writing and books less relevant to our age.

Another question is whether the two thinkers' writing styles are connected to their position from disputes and polemics. Indeed, their styles cannot be easily categorized and have often been described as disordered (Mansu:r 1977: 41), especially since both writers tackle various subjects and move between them depending more on a certain rhythm of thought rather than on clear-cut chapters. Schoeler quotes Adam Mez who admired al-Jahiz's ability to write about everything from the schoolmaster to thieves to lizards to attributes of God (Schoeler 2009: 58-59). Said Mansu:r explains how, in the midst of many topics that al-Jahiz addresses:

The main points of the book were hidden among irrelevancies and have to be ferreted out. This feature makes the book at times appears loquacious and weakens the impact of its argument. It also makes our task more difficult." "Individual arguments, however, are sometimes presented in a systematic way in spite of the generally disordered nature of the work. Even so, they may be surrounded by or interspersed with digressions that mislead the student, though they may entertain the reader. These digressions are among the main features of al-Jahiz's style in writing. There may be reasons why this style was adopted, reasons that have to do with al-Jahiz's way of thinking or the purpose that directs his work. (ibid: 41).

Can this be compared to Foucault's defense of writing as a method of thinking which should remain at the level of diagnosis without a prior destination? Indeed, yet only to a certain extent. The difference is that al-Jahiz was consciously writing for both the elite and the common reader (See Schoeler 2009: 58-60); was trying to "flatter the taste of the lowest among [readers]" (Mansur 1977: 42); and was no doubt a pioneer of the theory of *baya:n* (clarity), which Foucault was not. Both their writings can be viewed as disordered by contemporary academic standards, for they attempt to encompass debate in the form of a book away from the power-relations of orality. This kind of 'disorder', however, in no way resembles the "hysteria" of our word-filled digital world, where debate is rarely internalized as much as it is in a hurry to find victory on the platforms of social media.

This topic has been raised, for example, by the sociologist Zygmunt Baumann in a 2016 interview where he claimed that social media are a "trap" (Baumann 2016). For Baumann, social media provides the feeling of being "in control" over others by the acts of adding and deleting, thus giving the illusion of a created community (ibid.). He states that social media "don't teach us to dialogue because it is so easy to avoid controversy", and in this way people "cut themselves a comfort zone where the only sounds they hear are the echoes of their own voice, where the only things they see are the reflections of their own face." (ibid.). Indeed, digital platforms have become fields for debates, wars, polemics and conversations, but it remains unclear how the "written" yet fast and accessible aspect has affected the search for truth and the activities of thinking, especially given the absence of a 'real' solitude which al-Jahiz associated with reading and Foucault with writing. There, there is no victory or defeat over one's one reasoning intellect according to al-Jahiz, and if there is power or authority whose origin, according to Foucault, remains unknown.

Conclusion

Al-Jahiz and Michel Foucault lived in different centuries and belonged to different cultures and used different languages. Yet they both liked writing and preferred it to face-to-face encounters. They considered oral discussions to be a threat to truth, because in that 'game' the participants are driven by a very human love of victory and are restricted by the dialogue form, turning the discussion, however 'deep', into an exercise in power and not in thinking.

For both thinkers, oral debates are 'war', while writing and reading in solitude are not. In the activity of writing the warrior becomes a subject who 'does not want to remain the same' (Foucault), and struggles only with his intellect (al-Jahiz) in the pursuit of truth. He is humble, is not filled with a desire for vainglory, is not watched by an interlocutor, and therefore feels genuinely free.

The two thinkers' similar arguments can be very helpful in our digital age. How many people still write and read in complete solitude, and resist the temptation of polemics and 'sharing' on social media? A few, perhaps. The rest, in my view, are in serious need to separate the illusion that they are practicing a form of knowledge every time they engage in a discussion, from the activity of thinking and rigorous pursuit of truth as viewed by al-Jahiz and Michel Foucault.

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الجاحظ وميشيل فوكو حول علاقات السلطة في المناظرات الشفوية

*بلقيس الكركي **

ملخص

يحاول هذا البحث تسليط الضوء على تشابه صادم بين أفكار مفكّرين مركزيّين: الجاحظ وميشيل فوكو. ورغم أنّهما ينتميان إلى سياقين مختلفَين: تاريخيّاً وسياسيّاً وفكريّاً، فإنّ هذا البحث يكشف أنّ آراءهما حول السلطة في المناظرة والجدل متشابهة جدّاً. مع ذلك، وبالنظر إلى الطبيعة المعقّدة لمشروعيهما الفكريّين، فإنّ هذا البحث لا يدّعي تقديم دراسة مقارنة متكاملة، بل يبقى وصفيّاً في منهجه في الغالب، ويحاول الكشف عن تصوّرات كل من الجاحظ وميشيل فوكو حول المناظرات الشفوية التي تتشابه رغم اختلاف المنطلقات الفكرية لكلّ منهما.

الكلمات الدالة:.الجاحظ ، ميشيل فوكو، مناظرة.

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